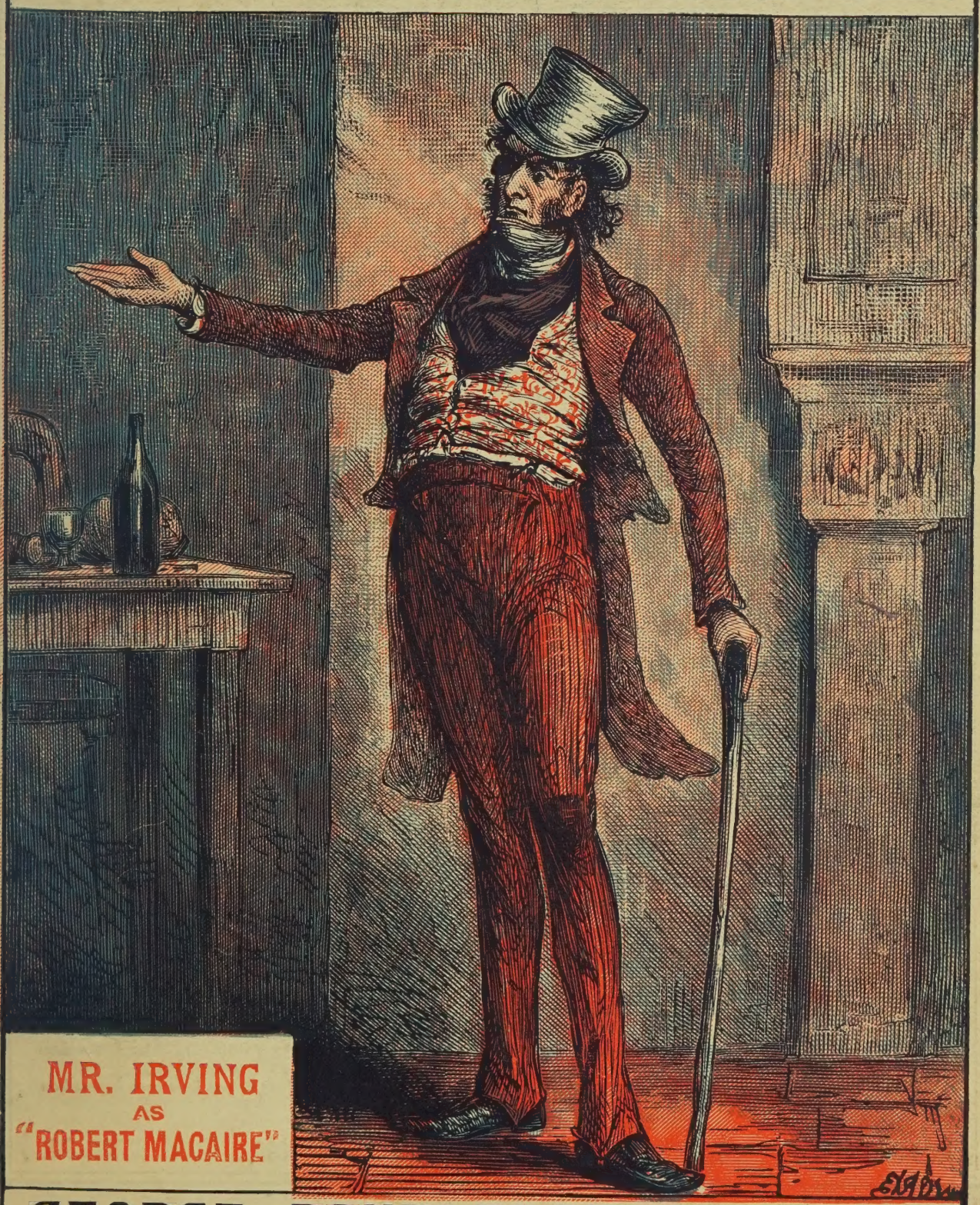
PRICE SIXPENCE.

ROBERT MACAIRE



MR. IRVING
AS
"ROBERT MACAIRE"

GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS

'THE STOMACH GOVERNS THE WORLD'

GENERAL GORDON.

DEPARTED ERRORS.—"Our past becomes the mightiest Teacher to our FUTURE; looking back over the Tombs of DEPARTED ERRORS, we behold by the side of each the face of a WARNING ANGEL."

LORD LYTTON.

After a Day's Pleasure use ENO'S "FRUIT SALT" and ENO'S "VEGETABLE MOTO."

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Then comes the reckoning, and they laugh no more."

"Moderation is the silken string running through the pearl chain of all virtues."

BISHOP HALL.

DRAWING AN OVERDRAFT ON THE BANK OF LIFE.—Late hours, fagged, unnatural excitement, breathing impure air, too rich food, alcoholic drink, gouty, rheumatic, and other blood poisons, feverish cold, biliousness, sick headache, skin eruptions, pimples on the face, want of appetite, sourness of the stomach, &c.—Use ENO'S "FRUIT SALT" (and ENO'S "VEGETABLE MOTO" as occasion may require). They are everything you could wish as simple and natural health-giving agents. You cannot overstate their great value in keeping the blood pure and free from disease.

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PREPARED ONLY AT ENO'S "FRUIT SALT" WORKS, POMEROY ST., NEW CROSS ROAD, LONDON, S.E.

ROBERT MACAIRE

ROBERT MACAIRE

A NOVEL

FOUNDED ON THE PLAY

L'AUBERGE DES ADRÉTS

LONDON
GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS
BROADWAY, LUDGATE HILL
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ROBERT MACAIRE.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

THE NEW ARRIVAL.

In the spring of 1803, Charmont-sur-pont was one of the quietest little villages in the whole of France. It was nestled in a small valley, through which a little stream ran to join the Isère, about two days' journey below Grenoble. The tree-clad hills rising up on either side sheltered it from all winds, and shut out the hum of the larger world.

It was little wonder that the villagers were peaceful and prosperous in this little garden plot of nature's making, for it would be impossible to imagine a more favourable condition for the enjoyment of rural life. The glebe was rich, the springs were many, and the summer sun shone with such radiant heat in the sheltered valley that corn and wine ripened unfailingly, and what farmers call "a bad year" had never been known.

But the peace and prosperity were not merely the growth of positive forces; men's troublous ways, and the irruptions of strangers troubled them not. Even the terrors and troubles of the Revolution had seemed to have passed them by, and now, when the hamlets of France were being drained of men to recruit the wasted armies, and to swell the "Army of England" which was gathering on the northern coast, this sheltered nook escaped unscathed.

Such a thing as a complete stranger was unknown in the village. Now and again came an official on his way from place to place—a casual pedlar, or an itinerant musician on their rounds; and at such times the curiosity which lay dormant in the breasts of even these old world villagers raised its sleepy head, and enjoyed the rare attraction. Very few of the villagers had ever been away from their homes. The Curé, it's true, went now and again to Grenoble, and the Doctor had been once to Paris within the forty years during which he had aided in the incomings and outgoings of humanity in this quiet spot.

It was, therefore, with strange feelings that the little group assembled under the spreading lime tree whose shade kept the clear water of the well perpetually cool, saw approach a stranger, and not merely a stranger, but a seemingly distinguished stranger—a young man of some thirty years of age, tall and well built, with striking features and flashing eyes, and a habit of command which, however, tallied but poorly with his time-worn clothes. He was a handsome, graceful fellow, with the easy gait that marks the habitual pedestrian. His glance was bold and roving, with something of the predatory look, which conveys to the educated eyes a customary ignorance of where the next meal might come from. In a word the man in a less simple community could not have been mistaken for anything but an adventurer; but, here in this forgotten corner of the earth, amongst a people so guileless, his very boldness, shiftiness, and extravagance of action became marks of a higher culture than their own.

As the stranger came up the dusty roadway, the little village crowd peered out eagerly from their shadowy citadel, and by some exercise of that unknown instinct which brings the vulture to the quarry, and the crowd to the street, the cottages began to pour forth their inhabitants. The village maidens made their appearance with marvellous celerity, considering the fact that they had remained an extra minute for further adornment.

The traveller seemed to be a shrewd fellow enough for the occasion, for so soon as he began to find himself an object of public attention, he began to slacken his pace, to look around with eyes of lazy inquiry, and generally to act with that careless

indifference which has so much charm for those who but seldom find their lives quickened by any object of curiosity. As his value perceptibly increased in the public mind, so he got slower and slower, until an agonizing fear came to all, that perhaps the stranger might, after all change his mind, and not condescend to visit so humble a place.

More and more anxious grew the little crowd which still kept swelling up as the new arrivals joined. The stranger in an unconscious way hummed a tune as though he saw no one. Then he stopped a little, looked around, and strolled on again. The villagers admired in silence and with gathering awe; the Revolution was not so far behind but men still remembered the tradition of the *Grand Seigneurs*, whose haughty indifference to all beneath them gave them a value in public esteem.

He came closer still, stopped again, and then, without seeming to notice, or even see anyone, came actually within the charmed circle of the lime-tree, which was now, as the evening came on, throwing lengthening shadows over the green. The crowd was silent. No one ventured to speak, but the stranger, looking listlessly around, picked out the prettiest and best dressed girl in the place, and, taking off his hat with a flourish, made her a low bow, saying, as he did so, with an admiring glance,—

"Lady, can you tell me where I am?"

The girl blushed, as she answered,—

"I do not understand, sir!"

"Pardon me, lady, or I am told I should say, 'citizeness!' Ah, me, how things are changed for me as for France!" Here he heaved a deep sigh, and threw himself with picturesque grace upon a rustic bench.

Then the whisper began to grow and grow that this was a returned *emigré*, and from henceforth his personal dignity, his noble bearing, and his lofty aspect generally became in Charmont-sur-pont almost articles of religion.

At first with some diffidence, but afterwards with larger measure of freedom, as they recognised that he was not unapproachable, one and all began to proffer their services. He was tired, he was hungry, he had come far, and was in need of

rest. He must allow some one to be his host; anything that could be done for him would be a privilege for them all—so ran the expression of the hospitality in the old-world fashion of these simple people.

The stranger received the proffered hospitality in silence; whereupon it was straightway doubled. Then one began to vie with the other in pressing on him to stay, putting forward the most tempting opportunities of repose.

The wily vagabond listened carefully, although he did not seem to notice. He observed, however, that the general strain of invitation was in the direction of a certain farmer Beaumont, whom by a chance reference he found to be the father of the pretty girl to whom he had spoken.

His mind was soon made up, and, rising to his feet, he made a graceful bow, and said to the little crowd with an air of infinite condescension,—

"My good friends, one and all, I thank you. I have been so long a stranger to the sweet enchantments of the tender hospitality of our dear France, that I did not realise at the first the genuine kindness of your welcome. Let me now atone. Let me put on record my sincere opinion that the jewel which I sought in vain, in the court of France, and amongst the noblest courts of Europe, I have found here enshrined in this loveliest casket of nature's own devising. But enough of this. The way-worn stranger thanks you from the bottom of his weary heart. My friends, I do not seek to know your affairs—nay, I do not even know your names. I am content to receive you as you are, without guarantee of any sort or kind. You are honest like myself. You are perhaps, some of you, in trouble, and have suffered even as I have myself. You ask no questions. I ask no questions. We are from henceforth friends, and as such I mingle with you freely. Here and hereafter I am a simple citizen of Charmont-sur-Pont."

No better instance could be given of the absolute guilelessness of these simple folk than the fact that they received in faith and with gratitude this appalling piece of sheer impudence. They all made low bows or courtesies, and rejoiced in their hearts and on their countenances.

Presently he said,—

"The night comes on, and I must stay somewhere. You mentioned the name, I think, if my memory served me right, of one Beaumont, at whose house you thought it well that I should rest. Is he here, or shall some of you conduct me to him?"

This speech settled the matter. Not only had he deftly quartered himself in the most desirable spot in the village and by the public desire, but he had in an indirect way, by renewing the matter of his accommodation himself, given a gentle reproof for their tardiness. How could any one after this venture to ask him any questions, although all were burning with curiosity to know something of him. As yet they did not know even his name.

So it was that the stranger became installed in the best house in the village as an honoured guest. Farmer Beaumont made much of him, producing for his benefit the best wine he had; whilst his wife and their daughter—an only child now, for the boy and girl who had preceded her had both died young—prepared a tasty supper, and spread for his bed their finest sheets.

The supper and the wine, especially the latter, seemed to thaw the stranger's reserve, for without being asked he told them his name, doing it in such a manner that he seemed to be conferring a favour.

"You will doubtless, my good friends, like to know my name. Well, a man, no matter who he may be, must not be a churl to those who have taken him to their hearts."

Here Marie blushed and turned away her head.

"You may call me—remember that I say it freely—you may call me Robert!"

"Robert what? or Robert who?" asked the farmer.

"Easy, my good friend! Such knowledge might be of inestimable value. But why, I say again, should I scruple to tell even such a thing to one who for aught any of us can tell may some day be close to my heart, through some one he loves, even as I feel I am close to his, and to the hearts of those dear to him."

Here the farmer scratched his head. His wife settled her cap strings, and Marie again turned away her head.

The stranger went on,—

"The name you long so eagerly to hear is none other than the proud name of Macaire!"

As he spoke it he threw himself back in his chair with an ineffable air of toleration at their surprise on hearing such a name; quite regardless of the fact that not one of those present, from the farmer himself down to the half-silly cousin who sat hugging himself in the chimney corner, manifested the slightest or faintest measure of surprise, interest, or any kindred emotion. Nevertheless, the effect was just what he had calculated on, for, seeing him expecting to see surprise, they all tried to exhibit some and blamed themselves for their own ignorance in not knowing the name, which thus gained vastly in importance.

It was only natural that when the next day the Beaumont family imparted the secret of the stranger's name, with various degrees of confidence, they should expect to find in their listeners an equal degree of surprise; and it was only natural, also, that they, being a simpler people, should have expressed in words their sense of disappointment. Thus it came to pass that in the village of Charmont-sur-Pont the name of Robert Macaire came to be regarded as one fraught with an honour all its own, and that the importance of the owner of it grew with an ever-increasing rapidity.

Macaire remained at the house of Beaumont, and, by borrowing a reasonable sum of money from his host, as a personal favour to him, and by various purchases of clothing effected in the neighbouring hamlets on his account, for he would not leave the place even for a few hours, be began to make a better appearance.

Hitherto the rustic youths had regarded Marie with distant love; they had not ventured to lay their stricken hearts at her feet, but had contented, or rather discontented, themselves by admiring afar off the beauty which they dared not approach. Now, however, with the sight of a rival—for as such they of course regarded him—lovers regard every one as a rival, and

rightly so, when they have not the courage to speak out for themselves—before them installed in the house, and their possible chances fading into nothing, they began to grow more courageous and to come closer to the object of their adoration, although they did not dare to speak.

There was one important exception to this rule. A bright-eyed, keen-witted young fellow, called Pierre Lamar, the son of a well-to-do farmer. He was somewhat younger than the rest of Marie's silent suitors, and he had hitherto refrained from speaking to her of his love from the natural diffidence of youth; but for some time it had been half understood between the old folk that if the young people should care to make it a match, there would not be any objection experienced from the seniors.

Pierre became more ardent in his wooing, and although Marie had all a woman's natural gift in the way of protection by keeping a declaration away, it took her all her time to prevent the young man from declaring himself. Robert Macaire did not like the constant attention which was involved in the young man's passion, and tried to keep him away; but all in vain, until by his delaying to declare his own intentions, Marie prompted Cupid with a little jealousy.

As Pierre's hopes began to grow, Robert awoke to the necessity of the case, and as a preliminary, asked Marie to give Pierre his *congé*. This she did, protesting that she did not know why she should do so. Pierre was therefore kept strictly amongst the crowd who in the evening were permitted to come to the foot of their idol.

This was very pleasant for Marie, who, like all her sex, loved admiration, and also for Robert, who, like all his sex, loved company, and who, by this time confident of his success with the village beauty, could afford to be easy in his mind and to enjoy the company undisturbed.

There was a very general impression that Farmer Beaumont was possessed of great riches. For many generations his family had been prosperous and thrifty, and the hamlet was so small and so remote from any great centre, that it had always escaped lightly from the cruel exactions of the tax-farmers.

In those days there were few banks, and in such spots as Charmont-sur-pont they were quite unknown. Those who had any money to keep—and they were none too many—preserved it by the simple expedient of locking it in a strong box, hiding it in their house, or burying it in the ground.

Robert Macaire knew well enough that the riches which seem great in the minds of village lads may be only poor when measured by the needs of idleness ; but he was satisfied that there was some money, a great deal to a man who has nothing at all. The talk of her father's wealth decided him, and he took a favourite opportunity of declaring his love for Marie. The poor girl had little to say, except to tell him tearfully and with a full heart, that she had loved him from the first.

The farmer, after the manner of fathers, would have questioned the wisdom of the step ; for he would have liked to have known something more of his would-be son-in-law ; but he was overruled by his wife, whose sympathy with her daughter—after the manner of mothers—blinded her eyes to the danger she was incurring.

The swains were inconsolable, to the indignation of the other girls, who could not see what there was in Marie—although they loved her very dearly of course—to merit such an absurd attention on the part of the young men.

Some of them did not hesitate to speak their minds pretty openly, and there were several unpleasant scenes by the well under the old lime tree. This publicity brought some of the young men to book, and some of the others, recognising from Marie's attitude, that their hope was but small, gave up the chase, and betook themselves to solitary wanderings in the forest and carving initials on the trees—such of them as could write—and such despairing devices in the way of hearts transfixed with arrows as their imaginations could evolve.

Robert did not lose any time in having the date of the marriage fixed. "The girl was willing," he said, "the mother was satisfied, and the father did not object, therefore, what was the necessity for delay ?" For reasons of his own on which he did not choose to enlighten them, Robert did not want any formality about the marriage which could be

avoided. He told Beaumont that he did not trust lawyers, a speech which pleased the old man, who did not trust anyone, and quite won his heart by saying, when they came to discuss the betrothal,—

"I do not know whether Marie is to expect any *dot* from you, and I do not care. I am quite content that you will do what is best for her. I want nothing—except to be allowed to live here with you, my dear father and mother, so that I need not take Marie away from the home where she has been so happy."

This, of course, made everything smooth for all parties, and not the least for Robert himself, who thus escaped any dealing whatever with public officials, whom he shunned; and won completely to his side the old farmer who found, indeed, that he "had not lost a daughter but gained a son."

The wedding was a great occasion in the village. The oldest inhabitant could not remember such doings, not even when the crowning of Louis XV. filled the whole of France with such rejoicing that people were found who believed that there would never be hunger any more.

But there are always people to be found who will believe anything.

CHAPTER II.

PIERRE DEPARTS.

When the village had settled down after the unusual festivities all seemed to go merrily as a marriage bell. Even the love-lorn swains, now that their chances had hopelessly gone, settled down as men almost invariably do to the acceptance of the inevitable; and the village maidens, now that so dangerous a rival was removed into the calmer atmosphere of matrimony, could afford to go back to their lovingkindness to their old companion.

Marie lived in a dream of joy. She adored her husband, and he returned her love with a young husband's plenitude of caresses. He was tender with her mother, and each evening entertained her father with a host of reminiscences. The cottage became each evening a new social centre. One after another old friends dropped in to hear the wonderful tales which Marie's husband had to tell. Needless to say these stories were all, or at least in great part, in some way reminiscent of his own prowess, his daring, or his acuteness. The simple rustics sat with open mouths, and the speaker grew in heroic proportion in their minds. His adventures seemed to be marvellous. In his absence from France in the foreign country —the name of which, by the way, he was very careful never to mention—he seemed to have been always in hot water. His record of escapes from prison would have led a wiser audience to infer that there must have been some good reason for his so constantly getting into prison, since he had so many a time a need to get out again. Once he went so far as to show on his ankles the chain marks which he bore with him in his escape from the galleys. This was an occasion of a festive nature, the silver wedding of his parents-in-law, when the wine had flowed

pretty freely and the tongues of all had been loosened. Marie did not like such a thing spoken of even in jest, or for the purpose of a boast. Her husband's honour and credit were dear to her, and it was like a blow to her to hear even from his lips the mention of the fact. The rest, however, were not so particular, and to the men it was only an excuse for another glass, whilst the pity of the women grew. Some of the latter had even a little jealousy on the subject—their husband or their lover had not such marks to show, and therefore could not be distinguished in a similar way.

The next day, when Robert had quite recovered himself, he did not care that any allusion should be made to the occasion, and when his wife, with her heart full of pity, wished to comfort him with a caress for his past suffering, he got quite cross, and spoke so sharply to her that for a good while she felt a little afraid, and did not venture to allude again to the topic.

There was only one of those who had been present when the confidence was made who seemed to remember it. This was Marie's old lover Pierre. He said nothing at the time, but a few evenings afterwards, when he was by chance alone with the husband and wife, he asked Robert how long he had worn the chain. Robert answered tartly that he had worn it longer than he had chose for; whereupon Pierre, somewhat nettled, answered back that it was a pity he had to put up with so much unpleasantness, and wondered he had not chosen to get rid of it sooner when it troubled him so much. He said this in an aggravatingly doubtful way as if he did not believe the story, which, to do him justice, was but the exact expression of his sentiments. Robert got very angry, but restraining his passion, said to him slowly, and with such an intention of affront that the other could not but notice it had he been never so thick-skinned,—

"My good fellow, we often have to put up with unpleasant things, and with unpleasant people, too; but we who are not mere vulgar boors, know quite well how to get rid of them when the time comes."

Pierre did not want to distress Marie by quarrelling with her husband in her presence, so he simply shrugged his

shoulders and seemed to take the matter as a joke. All the same, however, he took the matter to heart, and although he let the conversation drop for the time, he determined to renew it at another time when Marie should not be present. In the meantime he was ill at ease at such a rebuff, and took the earliest opportunity he could of getting away. He never came to farmer Beaumont's house again, and as the incident had the effect of curing him of his seemingly hopeless passion he was perhaps in the long run glad of the rude rebuff.

Not very long afterwards he had a slight altercation with Macaire. The latter, when he had taken a certain amount of wine—which, by the way, began to occur with incommendable frequency—was given to a rude kind of "chaff," which had always in it such a measure of unkindness that it became apparent that he had a rough side to his character and something of a decidedly bullying nature, the very suggestion of which began to make him enemies. From this he began in a measure to be feared, and there were not wanting some who when he was not present, predicted some evil to him from his rough tongue. Amongst those who felt aggrieved by Robert's unkind badinage was Pierre, but he resolved not to have any altercation if he could avoid it, for the sake of Marie's peace of mind.

He was, however, only a very young man, and the blood of youth is hot, and there are limits to a young man's patience.

The occasion came one evening when Macaire was more than usually rough in his manner, and seemed almost as if he had determined to have a quarrel with some one. He tried to provoke his usual victims, but without avail. This irritated him, and he grew nastier still in his manner, but still without response; so that when Pierre joined the circle he greeted him in the most insulting manner he could, saying:—

"Come here! Come here, my little Jack-in-the-box! Make way there, gentlemen, for the unhappy lover who was tossed! Come, little boy. Drink a measure to the successful rival who carried off the bride."

Pierre's blood began to boil, the more so because the other young fellows began to laugh loudly, partly to cover their own

discomfiture, and some of them in a secret hope that Pierre, who was well known to be one of the strongest young men in the place might be inflamed to chastise the insolence which had been showered upon them. He tried to control himself, and succeeded to some degree, although the hot flush of passion mounted to his brow. Robert was evidently determined to provoke him, for, leaning back in his chair, he said with an air of infinite contempt,—

"Look, gentlemen, the pigeon is changing to the turkey-cock. For myself I do not care to see the sparrow in a rage, although the spectacle is not without its comic side."

Pierre could hardly speak with rage. He felt the veins of his forehead swelling, and the laughter of his companions rang in his ears with a confused noise. With a great effort he controlled himself; he stood quite still, and his face grew white as marble. In a low voice he said slowly,—

"I have borne all your slights and insults without a word, on your wife's account; but you had better beware, or you may get your deserts."

"From you?" asked Macaire, sneeringly.

"From me, if necessary," answered the young man; "but up to a certain point you may escape on your wife's account."

"What the devil has my wife to do with you? She didn't seem to care very much about your feelings although you were rather spoony on her before she became my property."

This he said with an air of insolent triumph, which would have roused any man. Still Pierre kept silent, and the rest were silent also, for they recognized that his blood was up, and that his wrath might possibly fall on some of them. Robert did not enjoy the silence; there was little fun in his torturing unless there were others to enjoy it, so he tried another tack.

"Dear me; how hot of blood we are! With such a superabundance of pugnacity I wonder that you do not seek a place in the army. There is plenty of work to be done—by men who are not afraid to do it. Why do you not join the Army of England? There is need of young men there."

Pierre answered slowly,—

"I suppose you were on your way there when you found your way here. And yet it is strange that you came from the north. I suppose that you had to rest yourself and recover from that wound in your leg, where you carried the shot. As I can claim no such distinction, and have no such honourable wound to show, I think I shall leave such excellent company. For you, I should advise you to go home to your wife, and for the future keep either your mouth shut or your leg covered. You can perhaps afford one luxury, but you cannot afford the two."

With this he turned on his heel and left the room.

The rustics were now in a greater quandary than ever as to what they should do, for, to their great surprise, their bully when confronted had not ventured a word in answer, but had sat quite still gnawing his lip. They, however, had not confronted him, and they feared that he would have his revenge out of them; so they all sat still, until Robert Macaire started to his feet, and said,—

"Here's to the health of Pierre Lamar. He is a fine young fellow, and will be off to the army before long you will find; perhaps he will be gone before the week is over—perhaps even earlier still."

"He can't go to-morrow, anyhow," said Gustave, one of the usual butts, "because to-morrow he has to bring a cask of wine to the frontier, and will not be back for three days at the earliest."

"Ah, gentlemen, it will be as I say. You will find that the young man will volunteer; he is keen for fighting. You saw yourselves how he attacked me on account of a little innocent chaff which not one of you ever minded."

"Well, he will have time to cool down on the way, for he won't have much company to cheer him in the morning."

"How do you mean?" asked Macaire, turning to him.

"He goes by the mountain road, where not one person travels in the week. And he starts early, too, for his father said that he would call him at two o'clock, as he had to start at three."

Robert Macaire said good-night to his comrades, and the last remark he made was:—

"You will find that I am right. That young man means soldiering, and when he leaves this we shall probably have seen the last of him."

When Robert Macaire arrived home his wife was sleeping. He did not awaken her, but lay down on the bed in his clothes.

The night wore on. The man still lay without moving. When the clock struck two he arose softly. The house was wrapped in slumber. He stole out, and creeping from shadow to shadow passed silently up the mountain road. About half a mile on there was a dangerous place where the road ran over a shelf of rock with a precipice beneath. Here he stopped and busied himself for a few minutes with a stake picked up on the way. Then with an evil smile on his face he drew back into the shadow.

There came a cheery sound up the pathway—that of a pleasant young voice urging on a mule as it made a vigorous effort to master the upgrade. When they had got near the shelf of rock the mule stopped, and refused to go on, despite the remonstrances of its master. Pierre, with encouraging words, dropped his rein, and went to the mule's head to see what might be the matter, for he had never known the animal to refuse a difficult place before.

As he stood on the narrow shelf, there was a sudden rush forward—the mule shied—Pierre received a violent push, which sent him off his balance, and man and mule disappeared over the precipice together.

About three o'clock Marie awoke suddenly. There was some trouble on her mind which she did not understand; but her husband lay sleeping beside her, and her fear began to pass away. At first she thought she would wake him, and even mentioned his name, in the hope that he was sleeping but lightly, and would easily awake; but he slept on soundly—although, as she took notice, his heart was beating very hard for a sleeping man. However, he was there, and her wifely concern was satisfied, so with a sigh she sank to sleep again.

The next two days passed uneventfully. Pierre Lamar did not return as expected on the third day; but as he might have

been put to some trifling delay his parents were not uneasy. But when a fourth, a fifth, and a sixth day passed without any tidings of him they grew seriously uneasy, and began to make inquiries from all. Some one told them of the quarrel with Robert Macaire, and of the prediction of the latter that Pierre would go for a soldier. Straightway the mother, half distracted, sought him out, and implored him to tell her why he had come to such a conclusion. He answered her, with a degree of kindness which was quite unusual with him nowadays that he had often seen young men in different countries take the same fancy to go to the wars; and went on to say,—

"It usually happens when a young fellow has been crossed in love. Now, your boy was, I believe, one of those who thought that Marie would make an excellent wife. He had evidently got the war fever on him, for the other night he actually wanted to quarrel with me, and looked so strange that I told the others that he had probably made up his mind to go soldiering. Any of them—Michel, or Gustav, or William—will tell you that I said so at the time. However, you need not, I think, be uneasy about him, for he probably will not send you word until he has got his epaulettes. These young men who run away on account of love affairs are pretty vain, and like to prove that they knew better than their parents, although they don't seem to care much for them when they leave without a word. Pierre was——"

Here Marie came and put her hand over his mouth tenderly, saying,—

"Oh, hush, Robert! Do you not see that you are torturing his poor mother's heart?"

"Torturing his mother's fiddlestick!" was the heartless response, as the tears rushed to poor Marie's eyes. She felt just as if he had given her a blow. As for Pierre's mother she simply sat down on the floor, and threw her apron over her head, rocking herself to and fro in an agony of grief. Presently Madame Lamar raised her head, and asked,—

"When did this quarrel take place?"

Robert answered, gruffly,

"The night before he went for a soldier!"

The mother threw up her arms with a despairing cry,—
"I shall never see my boy again!"

Robert drove his hands into his pockets, and went out of the room without a word, whistling the "Carmagnole."

When Robert spoke the words "the night before he went for a soldier" a chill like a knife went through his wife's heart; and, why she knew not, there rose to her mind the memory of the rapid beating of his heart as he lay that night in such deep sleep that her whisper could not wake him. Henceforth part of the joy went out of her life.

CHAPTER III.

THE HIDDEN TREASURE.

After a few months of married life there seemed to come some sort of change over Robert Macaire. He seemed to get rather more restless than he had been, and now and again had manifested sudden fits of passion. These occasions had generally been when he had been refused the loan of money by old Beaumont.

Marie tried to avert such difficulties by keeping her husband supplied with pocket-money from her own earnings; but his needs grew greater as the time wore on. Marie, too, had a private trouble, which was also a joy, coming on, and she did not feel strong enough to work as hard as she would have wished. And so the time passed until the spring came round. Then, as the days lengthened, Robert grew later and later in his hours for coming home. More than a few times had Marie to make excuses to her father, who now began to have doubts as to the wisdom of the marriage. Sometimes when Robert came in he was in quite a jubilant mood, and laughed and chuckled softly to himself whilst she, despite her true affection for him, was afraid to appear to be awake. At other times he would be moody in his manner, with a kind of sullen fierceness which made her heart beat with fear.

Once she awoke suddenly. The hour was late, and her husband was not by her side. She rose quietly, and stole to the cottage-door with careful footsteps lest she should awaken her parents. For a while she stood at the doorway peering out through a chink to see if she could thus get any tidings of her husband. There was no sign of anyone about. Whilst she stood thus she heard a sound in her father's room, and slipped back into the shadow.

The door opened softly, and her father came out. He went to the corner of the little hall-way, and took his spade. Then it dawned on Marie that he was about to hide the money which she knew that he had received for some beasts the day before.

He passed out of the door which he closed softly behind him. Marie went to the door again, and looked through the crack. She saw her father before her passing silently out between the shadows, and then she almost screamed out, for a little way behind him ; passing along in the shadow she saw the form of another man dogging his footsteps. She could not be certain, but she feared that she knew that form only too well.

With her brain in a whirl, and her heart as cold as ice, she threw her cloak round her and followed them.

When her father had gone but a little way into the coppice he stopped, and at the foot of a great chestnut-tree began to dig. The form of his watcher was now visible to her, and her worst fears were confirmed. The man who was watching where her father was hiding his money was her husband !

Robert seemed to have accomplished his purpose in seeing the hiding-place, and turned to go home, leaving the old man still absorbed in his occupation

A great fear came on Marie lest he should see her ; and, in an agony of fright, she hurried from the place, and was so fortunate as to gain the house, and get to bed before Robert stole softly into the room. She pretended to be asleep, even when, as if to test the soundness of her slumber, he spoke her name softly.

That was to her a veritable night of agony. She feared to move lest she should attract the attention of her husband. Her mind was in a state of chaos. Her doubts and fears followed each other with lightning speed, whirling round in an endless race. There was one dominant idea, which every moment came into prominence, fell away, and came up again. This was how she might devise some means whereby she might prevent the hideous truth from being discovered, and yet protect her father from the designs of her husband, for she felt that they all stood on the brink of a precipice, and that a false

step on her part might be attended with the most disastrous consequences.

As the night wore away the suspense became unbearable, and having assured herself that her husband was now really asleep, she slipped out of bed, and sought help and comfort by kneeling at the little shrine to Our Lady, which was fastened in a corner of the room. Long she knelt there, and much comfort came to her. She stole back to bed with her mind clearer, and began anew to revolve the difficult problem.

By degrees a light seemed to come to her. The difficulties became less and less, and with the early dawn she sank into a light sleep; having resolved on a course of action which, although attended with much trouble, and a considerable degree of danger, might avert the trouble which stared them all in the face. She was so sure of her own singleness of purpose that it did not even occur to her that in her contemplated action, there was to herself a certain danger of having her motives misunderstood in case any premature discovery of her plans should take place.

What she had resolved was as follows:—She would go at the first opportunity she might have without risk of casual discovery, to the place where the money was hidden, take it away so as to prevent the temptation to her husband of stealing it, and hide it somewhere else, until she should have a good opportunity of restoring it to her father without betraying her husband.

When she woke in the morning from her troubled sleep, she could hardly realize that the events of the night were actualities and not hideous dreams. However, she set herself bravely to work, not to let anyone suspect that she had a secret to keep. Her mother noticed the dark rings under her eyes, and concerned herself about her; but she begged her quietly not to notice her, and went on with her work of preparing the morning meal. Her great concern was to avoid giving Robert an opportunity of going alone to the coppice, and to this purpose she never let him go out of her sight. He was ill at ease, and evidently wanted to get away, but as he was afraid that any suspicion would, of course, defeat his object; he had to

constrain himself to fall in with her purposes whenever, and however, she might express them. It taxed all her woman's ingenuity to find suitable excuses for keeping him by her side, and once or twice she felt the hysterical lump rising in her throat to such a degree, that it took the greatest effort in her power to control herself, in fact, had it not been for the gravity of the occasion, and the issue at stake, she would have given way.

Little do men know of the fierce battles which women have to fight with themselves on behalf of those whom they love, and to fight them all alone, uncheered by any sympathy, and without even the meagre consolation that in time those for whom the effort is made will know and appreciate the magnitude of the present sacrifice.

By and by Robert realizing that he was not likely to have a fit opportunity for looking after the buried money, determined to give it up for the present, and for the day to enjoy himself after his usual fashion. So presently he strolled away to join the other idlers at the wine shop, which was also the general and only shop in the place.

When she found herself alone, Maria had to decide at what time she would make the attempt. She felt that it must, if it was to be of any use, be made at the earliest possible moment, for she could see that Robert was bent on the evil work being done as soon as he could accomplish it.

She decided that whatever was to be done, ought to be done at once. As soon as she found a moment when she could escape her mother's eye, she took a spade and ran to the copse where the money was hidden. She did not lose a moment, but began to dig, and very shortly turned up a piece of canvas tied into a bag. Hastily she unrolled it, and took out the money, which she placed in her pocket, for she thought her wisest plan to prevent the risk of discovery, would be to wait for a favourable opportunity of hiding it in some other place.

Her heart was so full of a glad exultation that she had so far been enabled to save her husband from his contemplated crime, that she had not taken any heed whatever of the possible consequences of her own act. It was not until she

had placed back the canvas in the hole, and filled in the earth again, and smoothed it over so that its recent disturbance would not be apparent, that it struck her that the labour was not yet complete. She paused in her running, for she was by this time hurrying back to the house, and a sudden impulse took her to replace the money at all hazards. Just then, however, she heard her mother calling her, so she had to abandon the impulse. She returned to the house with a weight on her mind, which seemed to drag her down. Her mind began to torture her with doubts as to the propriety of her action.

"Might it not be possible," she thought, "that she had entirely misconstrued the motives of her husband. If so, what a terrible plight was she in. Not only had she wronged the man whom she loved—her own husband whom she had sworn to honour—with a base suspicion, but she had actually robbed her own father, and was even now in the actual possession of the stolen money."

The thought was a horrible one, and almost bore her down with fear.

But there was no time to lose. To show any signs of disturbance was to court inquiry, and inquiry meant danger—danger not only to herself, but to her husband.

So with a sick heart she went about her household work fearing something new and more dreadful than the last at every sound that smote on her ear.

That day seemed to be of endless length. All the time she was possessed of an absorbing desire to get away by herself, even for a few minutes; but each time she made the effort, some horrid fate seemed to thwart her purpose. At one time it was her mother wanted assistance, at another it was that she had to prepare the dinner for her father and her husband; then a neighbour dropped in to gossip, and she dared not try to get rid of her, lest an action so unusual on her part should invite suspicion.

If ill-doers only knew at the first what misery there is to one and all who come in touch with their crime, there would, perhaps, be less ill done in the world! It is a part, and a large part too, of the devil's opportunity that the consequences—

remote as well as immediate—of his service are not apparent at the first.

Robert did not come in to dinner, but a little later he turned up, and as something had to be got ready for him, there was another postponement of Marie's purpose. He was in excellent humour, and laughed and hummed tunes, and sang songs in the merriest of strains. Marie, with a heart in her breast as heavy as lead, and weighed down morally with the terrible doubts as to the propriety of her action, had to listen and even to join in the merriment. It seemed to her that she had to endure a martyrdom, and that all those whom she loved were in a conspiracy to cause her pain.

At last the day wore away, but without a single opportunity of her hiding away the money. In despair she took the earliest opportunity of going to bed, alleging that she was tired. To her horror Robert said that he was tired also, as he had not slept well the night before, and so would also retire to bed.

When Robert said that he had not slept well on the previous night, his father-in-law gave a quick, suspicious glance under his eyebrows. No one noticed it but Marie, to whom it brought unspeakable anguish, for she knew that suspicion once aroused on the old man's part must unfailingly lead to discovery. She seemed almost to see into her father's mind, and to read there the intention of changing the hiding-place of the money.

Thus she was hedged with danger on every side. If her father should seek at once to make the change, he would make the discovery of the robbery, and if search was made the money would actually be found on her. If her husband should seek to steal this night the money from the place where he believed it to be before she could dispose of it, he would most likely suspect some trick, and take action accordingly. The result would be that he would either get the money, or she would have to denounce him, and from either alternative, it is needless to say, she shrank.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GENDARMES.

THERE was but little sleep in the cottage that night. The whole party, except Madame Beaumont, were each trying to outwake the other. Robert wanted an opportunity to dig up the hidden money, so *also* Beaumont, and each with an entirely different motive; whilst poor Marie, with increasing dread, wanted to be rid of the money at any cost, for she feared that Robert might at any moment find it in her pocket, from which she had not dared to remove it, lest he should discover her in the act. Added to all this pain was the anguish of coming motherhood, and the fear that the very strain which she was now undergoing might imperil the life of her unborn child.

Seeing that she was not sleeping, Robert in his impatience flung himself noisily about, and by the sound he thus made in his impatient anger deterred the old man from venturing forth to seek the safety of his money.

When the little household assembled for breakfast, Madame Beaumont could not understand why the two men were so cross and tired, or why Marie, with flushed cheeks and eyes dim with wakefulness, was yet of such exceeding gaiety. The poor girl was trying, as many a poor woman has done before her time, to conceal the anguish of her heart under a mask of cheerfulness. At such time the eyes of men and women are often happily blind, and the poor hunted soul had a little rest under the shelter of their ignorance. Only the eyes of God and his angels never fail to look through the mask and see the fluttering soul beneath.

All that day the same state of things continued. Not one of those interested would relax from their endeavour. Towards

the evening the farmer, getting desperate, took his spade, and casually announced his intention of doing a little work in the field stretching up the hillside. This was beyond the copse where the money had been hidden, so Robert, jumping to his feet with alacrity, proposed in a hearty tone to aid him in the work.

Again poor Madame Beaumont was mystified at the sudden wrath displayed by her husband, as he told his son-in-law that he wanted no assistance. She mildly interfered, and said:

"But, my dear, would it not be well to let Robert assist you in the work? You have had a hard week of it, and you are not so young as you were."

To which he made reply, "A hard week of it, and a hard year of it too. Robert is not too ready to aid in the work, and I am not younger than I ever was. Robert can stay where he is, or go to the wine-shop as usual. That seems to be more his home now than my house is."

But if the old man thought to downface Robert Macaire when his mind was bent on a thing, he was much mistaken. One of the lessons which a man learns at the galleys is to be callous, and especially when he has a purpose to serve. So Robert, in the most genial way, tried to turn the whole matter into a joke, and said:

"Well, Daddy, if you will not let me help you, I suppose you must let me look on; and Marie will come with me and sit by us." He said this, knowing that if Marie were present he would not attempt to disturb the money, which would thus remain in peace until his own turn came to deal with it. By this time he knew perfectly well that the old man intended to change the hiding-place.

So poor Marie had to go with the two men, for neither ventured to forbid her, lest their own motive should be suspected, and to pass by the very spot where the grief of the discovery had come to her.

As might be expected, the time was unpleasant for them all. Beaumont was sullen, and would only answer in monosyllables when spoken to; Marie was miserable beyond expression, and it was only by a continuous effort that she kept from bursting

into tears, for now one more pain was added to her load. Robert, as if to revenge what he considered her unconscious thwarting of his purpose, treated her in a manner which he knew would give her pain. He would make unkind remarks and ask unpleasant questions, and when she would try to hide her pain with a smile, he would catch hold of her roughly and with a boisterous vehemence of speech. Indeed, he actually once or twice caused her much pain, a thing that one like her should not have had to bear, and more especially at such hands.

The sun was setting when the two men, as if by a tacit consent, gave up their purpose for the time, and they all went back to the house, silently, and with sullen looks on their faces; whilst poor Marie, with the prospect of such another night of agony before her, would have gladly sunk on the earth to have risen no more.

All that night she lay awake, and heard the clock mark off the weary hours that crept by at such a snail's pace. Again, Robert was exasperated by her wakefulness, and by his noisy movements kept old Beaumont from his plan of changing the hiding-place of his money.

In the morning she was almost in a fever, for she felt that her strength was failing, and she feared that she would not be able to hold out long enough to save the exposure which she dreaded. She knew that if something strange did not happen some dreadful trouble might come upon them all before nightfall; and that such might come to them at any moment whether anything unexpected happened or not.

A strange thing did happen; but it did not bring any relief to the poor woman's stricken heart.

Scarcely was breakfast over, when one of the neighbours ran in quite breathless, and called out:

"Quick! Go down to the shop. There is such news. Nothing like it has ever been known in——"

"What is it?" cried out Beaumont; whilst Robert Macaire said not a word, but sat still with a white face. Marie's heart seemed to cease beating. Everything seemed to upset her now.

"Pierre Lamar did not go for a soldier after all. The Gendarmes were coming over the mountain path, and they saw

something queer lying in the ravine under the precipice. So they went down the side of the mountain farther on, and went back up the ravine until they found it. There was the skeleton of poor Pierre. They knew it by his passport, which was *visé* to go over the frontier. The mule was there too, or rather its skeleton, for the crows had been down, and by him was the wreck of a wine barrel. They say it may have been a murder."

"A murder?" cried all the party except one. Marie's overwrought nature had given way at last, and she had fainted.

The last thing which she remembered was the sudden recollection of the hurried beating of her husband's heart that night; and then a red cloud passed before her eyes, and she remembered no more.

Oblivion is at times the most merciful of the things that be and yet are not. The waters of Lethe are the only medicine at times for a mind diseased!

Leaving Marie to her mother's care, the men hastened to the shop whither the gendarmes had conveyed the ghastly remains from the foot of the precipice. In his excitement Beaumont quite forgot his anxiety about the buried money. As for Robert, he was afraid to be very far away from the scene of the excitement. He was in truth drawn to the murdered body with a strange attraction, which is a part of the murderer's doom. For the present he had to give up all idea of bettering his resources at the expense and without the knowledge of his father-in-law.

The sergeant of the gendarmes was very grave as he held a rough court of inquiry over the bones of the murdered man. In common with French police officials he took the worst possible view of the circumstance, and was ready to downface any one who might venture to suggest that the death might have been accidental. In this he was supported in public opinion by the wild grief of Madame Lamar, who had come rushing into the midst of the little throng at the first tidings of the discovery having been brought to her. She was naturally in a pitiable condition. All the winter she had been hoping against hope that her son had really gone a-soldiering, and that she would some time get word of him. Now, at the end of this weary waiting,

the blow came upon her with crushing force, and her grief was so wild as to disturb even the soldiers, used as they were to scenes of a similar nature. She threw up her arms, invoking Heaven's vengeance on the murderer of her son; then she would throw herself in the dust and beat her head against the ground, with a measure of despair which was terrible to witness.

One by one the sergeant took the witnesses brought before him, and it would seem to all that there was certainly no reason to think that the poor lad had committed suicide, or that he ran any extra danger in passing by the precipice, for of all the youths in the village he had been perhaps the oftenest over that road.

As the inquiry was long and tedious, old Beaumont thought that it might be a fitting opportunity for him to change the hiding-place of his money. He went quietly away to his own house, and taking his spade, sought the tree where he had made the cachet, and began to dig. Presently he turned up the piece of canvas and his heart sank within him, for it was empty. The old man was almost distracted at his loss. Frantically he dug and dug, as if the earth could give him back the treasure which had been taken from it. Then when he realized that the savings of his lifetime had gone he was for a while as if dazed.

Presently he woke again to a sense of his loss, and then began to behave in quite an extravagant fashion. He tore his hair, and wept, and invoked vengeance on the thief.

As a rule peasants are misers. The nature of their work and their lives implies this, for thrift carried to the extremest verge of parsimony is the backbone of their success. Certainly Beaumont in the hour of his loss was an example of the class. No one in all his long life had ever seen him in such a state of mind.

Presently a new idea seemed to strike him, and saying to himself over and over again "The gendarmes! they will see me righted," he began to run towards the wine shop.

It was a new sensation to the villagers, when the richest and most respected man in the place came running amongst them calling out,—

"I have been robbed! shamefully robbed of all I have. You will see me righted! You will see me righted!"

Truly this was a wonderful day for Charmont-sur-pont. In all its history—so far as it ever had any—there had not been even one such sensation as there were now several. It would be a day to remember, and to tell their children of in the years to come. The fountains of the great deep of sensationalism seemed to have been broken up, and the floods had carried to and fro to bewilderment the minds and the memories of men.

CHAPTER V.

THE ACCUSATION.

By this time the gendarmes had gone in their investigation as far as the information allowed them, and were pretty well at fault regarding any proof of the death being the result of a murder. Police, however, all the world over, never confess that they are wrong, and the very fact that they are unable to make headway in an investigation is to them an additional reason for the continuance of their suspicion.

Being now quite at fault and almost anxious for an excuse for leaving the matter for the present without having to acknowledge the ignominy of defeat, they seized with alacrity the *divertissement* created by the charge of Beaumont.

The sergeant pulled himself together, got fresh paper and ink, and after snubbing his subordinates severely, had Beaumont placed before him, and began the investigation.

"Your name?"

"Charles Beaumont."

"Occupation?"

"Farmer."

"Age?"

"Sixty-two years on the twenty-seventh of last March."

"Married or single?"

"Married."

"Name of wife?"

"Marie."

"Her age?"

Here the farmer began to feel that an investigation was by no means a pleasant proceeding, for he found the eye of his wife fixed on him with a glance that was half anxious and half threatening. Good Madame Beaumont had—like the rest of

her sex—a rooted objection to tell her age. The farmer hesitated a little and began to stammer, being in nowise assisted in his difficulty by hearing his wife say in an audible voice:—

"The brave officer, who is a gentleman, will not, I am sure affront a woman. Tell him the truth, Charles!"

Her husband was just about to blurt out, with a man's usual stupidity, her real age, fifty-one, when the gallant serjeant cut in,—

"Thirty-three! Thank you, I heard quite well, and, if I may say so, a remarkably well-preserved woman of her years!"

Needless to say that by this conduct he earned the gratitude of every woman in the place; although, to tell the truth, the efficacy of the first part of the speech was spoiled to the minds of many by the latter part.

This little incident seemed to make things go more easily to all, except poor Beaumont, who being now more at ease on his own account with his inquisitor, had time to think again of his terrible loss. The inquiry went on, and the poor man told the story of how he had gone out in the night, and had hidden his own money in his own land as his father had done before him, he having got the idea of its being the only safe way to keep money from the exactions of the seigneur and the tax-farmer under the old *régime*, and from the patriots under the new.

Then he went on to say that he went to the place that very hour—even whilst the investigation on the remains of poor Pierre was proceeding—that he had dug in the very same place, turning over the very same earth, that he had found the very same piece of canvas in which the money had been tied up; but lo! it was empty, and the money had gone. He continued, that he made the charge of robbery, and that whoever had stolen his money would have to pay the penalty of the law.

The sergeant swore with many oaths of the strongest and most uncompromising character that justice should wreak her utmost vengeance on the wrongdoer. He was especially forcible, for with this real charge to investigate, he felt that he could recover the prestige which so far he had lost in the murder case. So he suggested that he should go to Beaumont's

house to make further inquiries on the spot and examine the ground. The wily sergeant had a good eye for the main chance, and he argued that as it was now getting on for dinner-time, he would have a better chance of faring well in the house of a man who had so much money to lose than he would anywhere else. Accordingly they all proceeded to his house, and there the inquiry was continued. When he had got all that was voluntarily told him, he began to make inquiries.

All this time Marie was in a terrible state of fright. She felt that the time must come when the blow should fall; but she felt quite powerless to avert it. Through the examination she sat silent, and when the evidence had all been volunteered she would have stolen away, partly for a moment's rest to relieve the tension of her mind, and chiefly to get rid anyhow of the money in her pocket, which seemed to weigh her down like lead, so that she could not understand why it was that the soldiers did not notice it, and ask her questions. Now she felt that there was a hope of a moment's respite; but just then the sergeant spoke.

"I must now ask some questions, and I shall require you all. Stay where you are, and I shall not detain any of you longer than I can help."

Marie's heart grew as cold as ice, and she felt the deadly faintness coming over her again. Her head seemed to reel, and it was with a pain as of death that she spoke—

"Let me go away, please! Please let me go away! Please, for the love of God!"

The gallant sergeant of the gendarmes was certainly not the man to be hard on a woman if he could help it. He exclaimed with genuine pity,—

"Poor girl! poor girl! she has no right to be here at all, and in such a condition too! You may go, at all events, until we want you. But you must first for form's sake tell me that you know nothing whatever of this affair, and, if necessary, be searched!"

They were all startled by the wild cry which broke from her. She rushed over to her father, and threw herself at his feet, and cried to him in agony—

"Father! father, save me, save me! Do not let them torture me with questions! Do not let them search me! I swear to you that I am innocent. You do not know what you are doing! You cannot know what misery you are bringing on me!"

Her father put his hands to his head, with a motion as though it were to save it from falling to pieces. He gazed in wild-eyed amazement at the helpless form crouching at his feet, and then stooped to raise her. But as he did so his hand met the heavy bulk of the money in her pocket; he let her go, in a sudden revulsion of feeling, almost casting her from him, to the great indignation of the sergeant, who muttered to himself.

"The brute! to treat the poor girl like that, and she in such a condition, even supposing that she was a thief."

Marie felt like death. The relief of swooning even was denied her, for she felt that some effort was absolutely necessary on her part. If suspicion were once cast on her husband (as it would be if she told the truth, and gave the motive of her taking the money), he might be in some way held accountable for the death of Pierre—a risk which, with her memory of the night when he left home, she dared not face.

The serjeant spoke very gravely now.

"This is a very terrible matter, but I have my duty to do. No one must stir, and the inquiry must proceed in due form. Young woman, you must answer my questions. What is your name?"

"Marie Macaire."

"Where is your husband?"

"He is there beside you to the left."

The serjeant muttered under his breath,—

"Oh, you are the husband, are you? A nice sort of husband you are, to let the poor girl without a word of help or comfort, have to speak in such a way to her father. I'll bet that you are no better than you should be." Then he went on aloud, "Tell me what you have to say about this matter?"

Marie was now determined to take all the blame on herself, and so she answered, with cold determination,—

"I took the money. I saw my father hide it, and as I had seen him I thought that someone else might have seen him too, and so I took the money that I might make it safe."

"What did you do with it?" broke in her father, in a rage. "Where is it now, you wicked girl?"

Marie was silent. She had some vain, desperate hope, that this question would not be asked of her now that she had confessed, and when her father had actually felt it in her pocket. The silence seemed to exasperate the old man still more. He did not know for certain that it was the money that he had felt; so once more he interrupted with a remark.

"I tell you, officer, that she has the money in her pocket. I felt it there. Search her, and you will find it."

"Turn out your pockets!" said the gendarme.

With a gesture of despair and a heart-breaking sob, she put her hand into her pocket, and said, in a low voice,—

"Oh, father!"

"Come! Be quick!" said Beaumont, in a harsh voice.

Marie went to the table and emptied her pocket of the sad weight which for so long had borne her down. The money was of all kinds, some of the coins were tarnished and some were green with long lying in the damp earth. Others were bright, and had evidently only been lately added to the store. When the old man saw them, he rushed at them greedily and turned them over in his hand, authenticating them as he went along.

"There is the louis d'or which my father gave me on my birthday. There is the Italian gold piece with the nick in it, which I had for the wine which I sent over the frontier. These are my coins. This is all my money, which has been stolen from me."

He said this all in such a heartless way that it hurt poor Marie almost as much as her own shame, to find that her father had quite forgotten that it was his own daughter whom he was so pitilessly accusing.

The serjeant now spoke.

"This unhappy matter seems clear enough. You have made a charge of robbery. The crime is confessed ——"

Here Marie broke in,—

"Crime! oh! do not say that. I never confessed to crime; the good Lord knows that I am innocent."

Here again the serjeant struck in,—

"You do not confess? You affirm that you are innocent. Then you must be screening someone else. Who so likely to be screened by a wife as her husband? Stay where you are!" this was spoken to Robert, who had risen, and was quietly leaving the room. "Now, please to tell me, did your husband know that you had the money?"

"Oh, no! A thousand times no!" There was such a ring of truth in her voice, that all who heard it were satisfied on this point at least.

The serjeant went on again,—

"How did you know where the money was hidden?"

"I saw my father hide it."

"Why did you think that it was in danger of being stolen?"

"I feared it."

"Did you suspect anyone?"

"No." This said very faintly.

"It was at night when you saw it hidden?"

"It was."

"Have you been in the habit of going out at night?"

"No."

"Then what made you go out on this occasion?"

"I saw my father go out with a spade, and I followed him."

"Did your husband know that you were going out?" This was getting into such close quarters, that Marie feared that one more question of the same kind would infallibly discover the secret which she was trying to guard. She hesitated. The serjeant angrily addressed her, "Answer my question, and without waiting. If you are trying to screen anyone else, I tell you plainly that it will be of no use."

"My husband did not know that I was out. He knew nothing whatever of my having the money until it was produced here in this room."

"Was he ever out at nights?"

Here, in a moment, was the question that she most dreaded. She looked around her with a wild, hunted, despairing look—tried to speak, but her lips moved unavailingly. Her hands moved for a moment wildly to and fro, and she sank senseless on the floor.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ESCAPE.

The sergeant of the gendarmes now took a decisive attitude. Calling to the men under him, he ordered them to arrest both Marie and her husband, as it would be necessary to bring them before the magistrate of the Commune.

Madame Beaumont protested vigorously. Her poor child was in no fit condition for a journey; that there was no charge against her that would warrant such a thing; that her father would not prefer the charge against his own child; that the whole thing was a mistake; that if any harm should happen to Marie it would be a murder—nothing but a murder; and that he, the gendarme, would be the murderer, and for all his smooth ways and words that they all knew now to be so false, would hereafter perish in everlasting torment, for that the *le bon Dieu* was just, and would not suffer such things. A thousand such things the poor soul said in her distraction, to the satisfaction of the neighbours and to the growing anger of the other gendarmes who would fain have resented them in some forcible way.

But the sergeant was a strong and masterful man, and knew how to keep his subordinates in order. He was himself full of pity for poor Marie, but he believed that she was screening some one—most probably her husband to whom he had taken a strong aversion; there is generally an instinctive feeling against the other on the part of both the predatory man and the man of the law.

But besides all this there was the mystery of the death of Pierre Lamar to be cleared up, and the sergeant had somehow got it into his head that in some way or other Robert Macaire was concerned in the matter. He had not got any

ostensible ground for the belief, so he did not ventured to even hint as yet at such a thing; but he had every intention of following up the train. He had fully made up his mind to keep his eye on him, and he was yet not satisfied how it was that a man so different from all around him had come to be settled in this little unknown village. Indeed, were the most secret thoughts of the astute gendarme known—not those which had actually found a voice to his own suspicion, but those which as yet his instinct had not revealed to his reason—it would have been found that he half suspected him of being in the category of "wanted."

Robert tried at the first go off to take a high hand in the matter, and claimed the rights of a citizen; but the sergeant took such a prompt and decided view in the opposite direction, that he quickly succumbed to the inevitable, and determined to trust to the chapter of accidents; the more so as the views of the gendarmes were accompanied with appropriate action in the shape of manacles.

The party that set out over the mountain path that afternoon was a sad one indeed. Marie was quite broken down with grief and pain. She had not even the consolation of a kind word, for Robert not only kept scowling at her all the time, and treating even any direct question which she might ask him with silent contempt, but he resented her speaking to any of the gendarmes, who kindly now and again proffered some little kindness of speech or action.

Moreover, the cart which carried her carried also a ghastly burden, the remains of poor Pierre which had been found at the foot of the precipice and which the sergeant thought might be necessary for his later investigations.

It was late in the afternoon when they started, so that the sun was beginning to throw long shadows through the mountains when they had reached the scene of Pierre's death. When they had arrived at the fatal ledge the sergeant called to them to stop. Then he pointed out to the others the disposition of the ground, and made a rough sketch of the place, remarking to Robert, in a voice of casual unconcern, which chilled his wife's heart,—

"The Juge de Paix will require you to tell how and where you passed the night that Pierre Lamar left his home, and why you predicted that he would go for a soldier and would probably never be heard of again unless he got promotion."

Robert made no answer but scowled at his wife, when no one was looking, in a way that boded ill for her happiness and even for her safety in case he should have her in his power.

The night seemed endless. The rude cart bumped and shook to a degree that would have rendered sleep impossible under the most favourable conditions. The gendarmes walked stolidly along keeping Robert always between two of them, for they seemed to fear that at any moment he might make an effort to escape. As for poor Marie they took little heed, for they never thought for an instant that it would be possible for her to make the necessary effort.

When the morning broke, cold and grey, and a wider range of country was under their view, the gendarmes relaxed their vigilance so far as to let Robert walk behind the cart, holding on to its back as they ascended a hill. Hithereto there had been to Marie a hideous and ever-increasing doubt as to her husband's guilt as regarded the death of Pierre; but his attitude, the very instant he got an opportunity of saying a word to her in private, turned the doubt into an appalling certainty.

When his face came opposite the opening of the curtains of the tilted cart, she was struck with the expression which she saw there—an expression quite different from any that she had ever before seen there. It was one of brutal, unmitigated ferocity; such a look as the galleys or the hulks only can produce. When a man descends in the scale of humanity to his very lowest, he can be, where his safety is concerned, more callous than even the brutes. The better qualities of mind and heart can disappear altogether, and the relentless instinct of self-preservation can be seen in all its possible basenesss.

Such was the look which met poor Marie's sleep-forsaken eyes as they sought for some gleam of hope in the gladness of the morning, and chilled her to a pitch requisite to hear unmoved the terrible confirmation of her fears.

She hardly knew her husband in the cruel looking, remorseless wretch who glared at her and spoke in a fierce whisper:

"Do you hear! I must get away somehow or they will settle me for that affair of Lamar. You must do it for me. I shall make some excuse to get into the cart. Be ready to change clothes with me; then put out your head and ask to be allowed to walk a bit. Then lie close, no matter what happens, or it will be worse for us both."

She attempted to remonstrate with him, but with a terrible oath fiercely whispered at her he enforced his order. Half paralyzed with this new fear she heard him ask the sergeant to let him rest in the cart for a bit as he was tired to death and chilled with the cold.

The sergeant consented with a contemptuous oath, but refused to stop the cart; so with a clumsiness quite unusual to him, for he was a man of great strength and activity, he half scrambled half tumbled into the cart, breathing maledictions on everybody and everything.

Once in the cart, and hidden from the view of the gendarmes, the change was easily effected, and with Marie's petticoat and cloak over his own clothes he was ready for the next step of the escape. By his instructions, Marie, with her little shawl over her head and her body hidden in the interior of the cart, asked the sergeant to let her walk for a little while as her limbs were cramped with sitting so long in the cart.

The sergeant could see no harm in so simple a request, so told the driver to stop for a moment whilst she got out. No sooner then the cart had stopped than Robert slipped down in her stead, imitating with a skill that showed that at some time he must have been an actor, the peculiarity of her gait, so that the soldiers never suspected there was any trick on hand.

For a while he walked behind the cart holding on as if to aid in walking; but after awhile he began to fall behind. Now and again the sergeant looked back to see as in duty bound that his prisoner was still there. One of the others asked him if he should not make her hurry up, but he answered that it was all right, as the man was safe in the cart and that the woman could not go far.

For some little time they progressed in this fashion. Marie's state of mind was terrible, and she only longed for death to put an end to her sufferings. All the light seemed to have gone out of her life. As yet she could not realize the blow that had fallen. Her husband a murderer, herself arrested as a thief, and even now on the way to some unknown peril, whilst the author of it all, the man whom she had loved, and loved still in spite of all, treating her not even with a cold indifference, but harshly, and threatening her.

When the cart, some little time afterwards, came near a wood which stretched for many a league around away to the frontier, the sergeant looked round to tell his female prisoner that it was time to get back into the cart, or to come again into line with the rest of the party, he could not see her. With a quick rush he ran to the cart and dragged back the curtain, calling,

"What does this mean? If your wife has escaped, it will be the worse for you. Get up you lazy——" here he started back in amazement, for his eyes met those of Marie dilated with fear.

"*Sacré!*" he called to the others, "he has escaped! Run, *mes enfants*. Quick! He cannot be far. He was here but a moment ago. Do not hesitate to shoot if he does not stop at the word."

The gendarmes ran back and scoured the road right and left, but all in vain, for Robert Macaire had broken from prison and escaped from custody too often to be caught napping when there was a chance to escape. He was already safe in the wood and under cover of its shelter, putting each moment a great distance between himself and his pursuers, whilst they were vainly searching for him on the ground which he had passed over.

Seeing that the search was in vain, and that the only chance of recapturing him was by raising the hue and cry from the station, the sergeant called his men back. They came; naturally enough thoroughly angry at the way in which they had been tricked, and vowing vengeance on Robert Macaire in case they should ever lay their hands upon him again.

The sergeant said nothing to Marie for awhile. He was a

merciful man according to his lights, and he knew it would only cause her more pain without doing her any good; and he felt that it was only natural for a woman to help her husband under the circumstances. Besides, he was not at all sure in his mind from the first that she was guilty. He could see that there was some mystery on foot, and he thought that in all probability she was not the most guilty party in whatever ill-doing was on hand. Presently, however, he came to the cart and said to her gently enough—

"I wanted to treat you as kindly as I could. You mustn't blame me if there is any rigour shown to you after what has happened. Poor soul! I pity you from the bottom of my heart. And you so young too. Little more than a child. I have girls of my own, and who knows that some day they may need a friend, or some hand of pity stretched out to them. Well, there! he's a worthless wretch to my thinking, and perhaps you're well rid of him—but he has escaped, and we are so near the frontier that if he is decently careful he may get away all right, so don't fret yourself; fretting about any danger to him, but keep your strength for what you have soon to go through."

This kindliness was too much for poor Marie after all the bitterness she had gone through. A flood-tide of gratitude rushed to her heart, and with a rush of tears she bent over and kissed the rugged hand that lay on the back of the cart as the old soldier walked along trying to comfort her.

From thenceforth, Marie had a staunch friend in the old sergeant who made up his mind that he would aid her all he could within the line of his duty.

CHAPTER VII.

AT THE SHRINE.

After a few hours more journeying the party reached their destination. For Marie it was a time of blessed peace, for the kind words of the sergeant had brought her such relief that wearied nature asserted her power, and she slept. So weary was she that she lay as one dead, and even bad dreams came not to her. The road had got somewhat smoother as they drew nearer to the valley, so that she was less jolted than had been the experience hitherto on the journey.

When they arrived at the Gendarmerie, the sergeant would not have Marie wakened. "Let her sleep, poor soul, whilst she can," he said. So a couple of the men lifted without awakening her, and placed her in a room where the sergeant's wife had her laid on a bed as good as was to be had. The door was locked, and she was left alone to sleep until the morning, when she was to be taken before the magistrate.

When she woke, after a long sleep, the sergeant's wife gave her a comfortable meal, and in many little ways, such as kind women know, helped to ease her distress.

In the morning she was taken before the magistrate and charged with the theft of the money. Of course, the sergeant had to tell the story of the escape of the other prisoner. Those in the court room were much interested in the recital, and when his description was given, one of the gendarmes who had newly come to the station said :

"That must be the very man who escaped from the Galleys at Marseilles, after killing two of the guards."

He was immediately interrogated as to the antecedents of the murderer, and Marie had to listen whilst the whole catalogue of her husband's iniquity was unfolded. With grow-

ing horror she learned that he had been many times in prison, from which he had, by some trick or subterfuge, escaped on each occasion; that he was a criminal of the deepest die—remorseless, pitiless, cruel; that his want of gratitude to those who had helped him in his times of trouble, had alienated even those who had clung to him the longest; that he had been accused of several murders, and suspected of many more, but that his cunning had been such that he had been able to prove on nearly every occasion that the guilt had rested with some of his dupes; that he had never hesitated to betray his fellows and accomplices when it had served his purpose. In the opinion of the speaker there was not so black a criminal in the whole roll of crime. Finally he had been convicted on a charge of murder, and condemned to the galleys for life. He had been in the gang at Marseilles for only a short time, when he had escaped by an effort of desperate courage, having in the doing so murdered two of the guards under circumstances of peculiar atrocity.

When the recital had come to an end the magistrate said, that so far as the charge of the theft was concerned he would have been content to let it lie over until a later time, had there not been direct evidence of the woman having taken the money, and its being discovered in her possession; as from the fact of her husband being such a desperate character it would have been presumably as a tool in his hands, that she had committed the theft. As, however, he had escaped with her assistance, it would be necessary that she should be held in custody for both charges, that of the crime with which she was charged, and the additional one of conniving with, and aiding in the escape of an arrested forçat. "At the same time," said the magistrate, "on account of the prisoner's extreme youth, and owing to the urgency of her condition,—and further relying on the fact that she may have on her trial some explanation to give, which may mitigate in the eyes of the court her moral delinquency in the matter, I am willing that every kind of personal consideration should be shown to her—consistent with her safe custody."

The hint of the magistrate was not lost on the sergeant or

his kind-hearted wife, and when she returned with them to the Gendarmerie they shared with her whatever comforts they themselves possessed. But though she had some measure of comfort, her state of mind was pitiable in the extreme. At one fell blow she had lost all that earth had to give her. Husband—for was not the discovery of his true character worse than death?—father, mother, home, friends, honest name, all that makes the happiness of life. Nay! was she not even at the moment a prisoner on a criminal charge. A prisoner! so that her child must be born in prison and be stained for all its life with the prison taint!

The idea appalled her, and in the great anguish of her soul a wild idea came to her. She would run away if she could from the prison; she had every opportunity, for the room she occupied was not even locked, since no one thought it possible that she could even make an attempt to escape; she would seek a shelter somewhere—anywhere—in her trouble. She might die—starve or perish from the cold, but death had no terrors for her. All she hoped was that her child would not be born in the prison. She felt that if she could once get out into the free air, no matter where, her little one might escape the prison taint—that it might not be cursed with the sins of its father or with her own unhappiness.

Whilst the thought was upon her she rose up and stole to the door. It was night. Not a sound was to be heard save the gentle rustling of the trees. She was a mountain-bred girl, and the sound—this voice of nature to which she was accustomed coming through the stillness—brought an unutterable relief to her soul. A sense of freedom came to her through all the pains that racked her.

She passed into the night, and fled on her way with one blind hope ever before her—that her child should not bear the prison taint.

As the morning was breaking she found herself close to a little wayside shrine. Her strength was going fast, but the sight gave her renewed energy. As she looked through the grating that guarded it in front she saw the figure of the Divine Mother, and her heart gave a glad throb as she sank to her

knees in the dust and bowed her weary head whilst she prayed. She felt no fear now. With that Divine image of motherhood and suffering before her she felt that her prayer was heard, and that her child would be free from the curse of its fatherhood. There alone, save for what she felt to be the presence of the Mother of Sorrows, she endured all the pangs of her maternity.

As the light grew in the east her thoughts hovered between the child that lay upon her breast and that other Child whose Star was seen in the Eastern sky so many centuries ago, and the solace of her pain came in the joy that a man was born into the world.

As the morning grew, however, a new fear began to assail her. She thought that she might be captured and taken back to the prison again. The fear that after all her son might yet get the taint of the prison gave her strength to stir herself, and she looked around her eagerly for some clue through the maze of doubts before her. She thought that the best thing that she could do was to place her child somewhere it would be taken care of, and where it would never know the sufferings or the despair of his poor mother or his father's shame. The thought of leaving him almost broke her heart. She faltered in her purpose.

Suddenly she listened. There was the sound of a horse's feet quietly cantering. The thought came to her like an inspiration that it could not be anyone pursuing her, or the pace would have been quicker. She made up her mind—she would trust her child to the mercy of this stranger.

Hastily wrapping him in her woollen shawl, she laid him tenderly at the foot of the shrine, after kissing him with passionate fervour, and hurriedly hid herself in a clump of trees that grew thickly around the shrine.

The horseman approached at an easy pace. She peered out eagerly through the leaves to see to what kind of person she was about to trust the fate of her child.

He had thrown the rein on the horse's neck, and was to all seeming unconscious of what went on around him. He was evidently in some deep distress, for the tears were rolling down

his cheeks. The mother's heart grew glad, for the eyes seldom weep when the heart is hard. As he drew near, the child, which missed the warmth of its mother's breast, gave a feeble cry.

The horseman instantly stopped, and it struck Marie with surprise that his first glance was upwards, as if he supposed that the voice had come from the sky. She understood the reason, however, with a gush of thankfulness from her motherly heart when she saw him jump from his horse and rush to the foot of the shrine where he fell on his knees and raised the baby tenderly in his arms as he exclaimed through his tears,—

"The good God has pity on my loneliness and sends me this little one that I may cherish him in the stead of my little Charles. Look down to-day on me, my young wife, from your high place beyond the stars. See for your sake and that of our little Charles, whom I laid in the earth on your breast so little while ago, I take this little one whom its parents have abandoned to be my son."

Marie sank to the ground with a heart full of gratitude, and as the stranger rode on his way holding the child in his arms, she bowed her head in her hands and said :—

"They may take me to the prison now if they like. They are sure to seek for me, and if they seek they must find me, for my strength is gone. To thou, Mother of Sorrows, helper of the afflicted, be the praise of my tears to-day, for thou hast guided my footsteps to this spot and hath rescued my child."

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

AFTER LONG YEARS.

In all the department of the Sâone-et-Loire there was no man more generally liked and respected than Monsieur Dumont, the proprietor of *Les Bons Amis*, a thriving *Auberge* which stood in the outskirts of the village of Simard, just where the high-road to Montret passes the end of the lane leading to the old church.

M. Dumont was a widower, having lost his wife some twenty years before. They had gone to Marseilles to see her father, her only remaining relative, who was dying. The fatigue of the journey had been too much for her, and she had died in giving birth to a son, their first and only child.

Having laid his young wife and her old father side by side, M. Dumont returned to *Les Bons Amis* with a little dark-eyed infant, a few weeks old, to be henceforward the great joy and interest of his life; for he never thought of remarrying, but devoted himself to the bringing up of his child, and the care of his inn and his farm.

In course of time the little delicate baby grew up to be a tall, strong young man, the pride and joy of his father—the apple of his eye. He was a general favourite with old and young; while his gentle manners and soft dark eyes made him specially popular amongst the young girls of the surrounding villages.

Things had gone well with M. Dumont, and at the time of

which we write he was a very prosperous man—as he well deserved to be—for he was always generous and ready to help his poorer neighbours.

An air of well-being pervaded everything about the house and farm. The thriving fields of golden grain, now almost ready for the sickle, were a picture to behold, while rows of great pot-bellied yellow *courges* lined the furrows. From trunk to trunk of the slender poplars were festooned the carefully cultivated vines, already showing promise of a good vintage, and a busy time for the *vendangeurs* who a little later would gather the purple fruit, and tread it out in yonder barns, with many a laugh and jest; for in those days, when the century was still but young, such simple methods were still practised, and modern improvements were quite unknown in that quiet village in the heart of France.

The *Auberge* itself was a picturesque old building, with high-peaked roof, and quaint little dormer windows lighting the spacious roomy *grenier*, where the winter store of fruit was kept:—apples and pears, and nuts of various kinds; while from lines stretching from rafter to rafter were hung bunches of grapes, each bunch snugly ensconced in its own bag and carefully separated from its neighbour.

And the kitchen—kitchen but in name, for no rough work was ever done there—how comfortable it was, and how picturesque with its deep fireplace, where in winter time great logs blazed and crackled—its roof hung with well-smoked hams, and many a bunch of sweet and savoury herbs and pepper pods; its rows of shining flagons, and well-preserved quaint old china and earthenware; its polished oaken tables and settles; the vivid colour of its red-tiled floor. In the corner by the fireplace was the picture of the Virgin, with a jug of fresh flowers on the little carved bracket beneath it, for they were pious, these simple people, and the Virgin never was without her little offering.

Upstairs what piles of soft, wool mattresses, with store of snowy, homespun linen sheets and cosy blankets! Then the best room, with its *armoire à glace*, its red, damask-covered chairs and sofa, in the style of the first empire; the tall, gilt-framed mirror over the chimney, the groups of wax and paper

flowers under glass shades, and on the wall, facing the window, the portraits of M. Dumont and his wife, taken when they were first married. There was not a girl in the *commune* who did not envy the future mistress of that room, for Charles, the only son of M. Dumont, had made his choice, and the pretty, blonde, blue-eyed Clémentine Germenil was to be the future mistress of *Les Bons Amis.*

Monsieur Germenil was a wealthy farmer, who lived at Brocard, on the borders of the forest of La Marche, some miles on the other side of Simard. He was an old friend and crony of M. Dumont, a warm man too, who could give his only daughter a nice bit of money. The two old men had long planned this marriage, and had watched with satisfaction the growing affection between the young people; and hardly a Sunday morning passed that did not see the *carriole* of M. Germenil, with its owner driving, and his daughter beside him, arrive at *Les Bons Amis* just as the bells began to ring for the midday service. The *carriole* was then put up, and the four set off together to the church.

M. Germenil pretended that he liked better the preaching of the good *curé* of Simard than that of the *curé* of *Brocard,* and that was why he came. But, for all that, everyone knew quite well that it was but a cunning device to give the young folks an opportunity of meeting.

Charles was a little shy, but at last took courage and spoke, as he and Clémentine walked home from church, side by side, under the tall poplars which bordered the stream, while the elders followed slowly at a discreet distance.

"Clémentine!"

"Yes, Charles?"

A long pause, during which she gives a sidelong glance at him out of her blue eyes, having a pretty correct idea as to what he is trying to say.

"Clémentine!"

"Well, Charles, what is it? Why do you repeat my name like that?"

"Because—because——. Dear Clémentine may I speak to your father?"

"Speak to my father! Why, of course!" she replies, perversely pretending to misunderstand him. "I hope you don't think I wish to monopolise you!"

"You *know* what I mean, Clémentine, when I ask you may I speak to him!"

"Indeed, I don't, Monsieur Charles. How should I?"

"I love you, Clémentine, and I want you to let me ask your father's consent to our marriage. You know I love you, and that in my eyes there is no girl in all the country to compare to you. If you refuse me I will never marry anyone. Say you love me a little, Clémentine, and that you will be my wife!"

"I don't know, Monsieur Charles! And what about Jeanne *du moulin?*"

"Jeanne *du moulin!* What is she to me, Clémentine?"

"Oh, well, you danced with her often enough at the fête last week, and then you——"

Charles interrupted her, crying—

"If I spoke to her at all, it was only because you made me angry by your civility to that great lout François."

"I don't know why you should call him a 'lout!' I am sure he is very *gentil* to *me* always."

"Well, don't let us quarrel about him, Clémentine; only tell me you like me well enough to give me leave to ask your father's consent to our marriage, and there won't be a happier or a prouder man in all France. Speak, dear Clémentine. You know how much I love you, and know my father wishes for no daughter but you."

"Well, Charles, I *do* like you very much; and, perhaps, after a time—a long time you know—we might——get—married."

"And I may tell your father now, may I not?"

"Well, yes; since you are so persistent!"

And so it was all settled, and there was much rejoicing, when, on their arrival at the Inn, Charles told what had happened, and made his request.

"With all my heart, *mon garçon*," said Germenil. "I have long wished this. A good, steady lad like you is just the husband for my girl. Your father and myself have talked it

over many a time. But, Sapristi! we began to think you would never make up your mind to speak! Eh, neighbour Dumont?"

"The boy has been my right hand and comfort this many a year," said Dumont; "and now he brings me the daughter I desired, and their little children will cheer my old age. On the day he marries, neighbour, he will become the owner of this Inn; and when I die he will inherit all my savings."

"Oh, father!" exclaimed Charles, tears standing in his dark eyes.

"And I," said Germenil, "will give Clémentine a *dot* of twelve thousand francs, and at my death—— But there, we are not going to die yet, my old friend. We must not forget that before we die we have to dance at the weddings of our grandchildren! Eh, old Crony?" and the two old men laughed, whilst Charles and Clémentine looked away. "We have many a hearty year before us, I trust!"

It was then arranged that M. Germenil and his daughter should come to *Les Bons Amis* the following Wednesday. The contract should then be signed, and the wedding take place the next day.

CHAPTER II.

AN ANXIOUS MOMENT.

On the morning of the appointed day every one was on foot brave and early at *Les Bons Amis*, everything inside and outside was put in apple-pie order, and by midday all was pretty well arranged. The best room was opened and aired—for there the *contrat* was to be signed by-and-by. In the kitchen, where everything shone till you could see yourself reflected in the very plates and dishes; the long table was spread for the *dîner du contrat*, covered with a snowy cloth, which bore testimony to the good housewifery and industry of more than one generation. For in those good old times women spun the thread for their own household linen, and the poorest girl in the *commune*, when she married, brought with her a little store of good homespun linen the fruits of her own industry.

Already the signs of good cheer to come pervaded the place. From a simmering *pot au feu* there issued an odour more than ordinarily rich and appetising. The best cured and finest ham had disappeared from its hook, and now bubbled peacefully in the biggest saucepan *Les Bons Amis* could furnish. The farmyard had been denuded of its savouriest ducks and plumpest chickens, which lay stuffed with chestnuts, and flavoured with the piquant onion, ready for the spit; and what a *soupe àla citrouille*, such as the *cuisinière* of *Les Bons Amis* was famed for making. To say nothing of the *plats doux*, the delicate *fromage à la créme*, the perfumed melons, the piles of green and purple figs, and such a salad! And then the wine. M. Dumont was not the man to stint the measure on such a day as this. There was the good *vin du pays*—more than one fat straw-cased flask which had come across the mountains from Italy—and to crown the feast, certain cobwebbed bottles of a

special vintage, which had been laid down in view of such an occasion as the present, and had quietly reposed for many a long year in the farthest corner of the *cave*.

Outside the house all was bustle and excitement. A fresh bush adorned the door, and the signboard, with its announcement that "Ici on vend le Bon Vin," had been decorated with a green wreath; the courtyard had been swept till not a grain of dust appeared. The little tables, and the benches under the *tilleuls* on the side facing the house, had been scrubbed to spotless whiteness; while Pierre, the old head waiter, who had grown grey in the service of M. Dumont, bustled about superintending the proceedings of his subordinates, who are carrying the wine out of the *cave*, the entrance to which, as is usual in such places, is at the side of the house door.

"*Depêchez donc mes enfants*—nothing will ever be ready if you go on at this rate. Hurry now and get these things out of the way. Where do you think people are to dance by-and-by if the place is lumbered up like this?"

Turning sharp round on one of the waiters coming out of the *cave* with a basket of wine,—

"What *are* you doing there, Louis? Here, give me that!"

"Please, sir, I'm doing nothing, sir!"

"Nothing! just so—nothing; but that's not what you are here for. Here you, François! Louis put that plank there; now put the barrel on it—so, that will do. Carry those bottles into the house, and then go into the garden and get the *bouquets* ready. Hurry now, Monsieur Germenil and Ma'mselle Clémentine will be here before we know where we are."

Just then M. Dumont, followed by Charles, came out of the house.

M. Dumont wore his usual serene and benevolent expression; but the young man's face was sad and troubled.

"Well Pierre," said M. Dumont, "how are our preparations getting on? You must bestir yourselves."

"Don't be afraid, *not' bourgeois*, I will answer for everything. Though, indeed, if I were not here to look after these lazy fellows the guests would come and find nothing ready."

"Well, well, Pierre; I rely on you, and have given you full powers. All I say is, don't spare anything—let there be plenty of everything; above all of wine. Nothing like that to make the violins throw off a lively measure; and I want nothing here to-day but love, and pleasure. Eh, Charles, what do you say?"

"I'll be bound he agrees with that," said Pierre.

"Dear! dear! to think that you were a little baby in arms when I knew you first; and here you are going to be married and have babies of your own for old Pierre to nurse."

Charles heaved a deep sigh.

"Saperlotte! what a sigh! and you just about to be married to the girl of your heart—and such a face! Why you look as melancholy as if you had been drawn in the conscription this morning! What's the matter, M'sieu Charles?"

"Nothing, my good Pierre, nothing."

"Why Pierre," said M. Dumont, "it is quite natural the lad should feel a little serious at the thought of all the responsibility he is taking on himself."

"Of course, of course—only I thought——"

"It seems to me," said M. Dumont interrupting him, "that you are chattering here, instead of seeing after what has to be done."

"Quite true, *patron;* so I'll be off. It would never do not to be ready when the company arrives."

As soon as Pierre had disappeared indoors, M. Dumont passed his arm affectionately through Charles's, and they walked up and down the courtyard. The younger man, with gloomy, abstracted air, while the elder watched him with an expression of kindly affection.

"Come, come, my boy! cheer up a little. This will never do. What will Clémentine think, if she finds you with such a long face on the eve of your wedding day?"

"'My wedding day!' But will it be indeed my wedding day? When M. Germenil learns this fatal secret, will he still be willing to give me his daughter? That is the question I ask myself over and over, and I dread to think what the answer may be."

"My poor Charles! I would have kept this knowledge from

you if it had been possible. But it is necessary that both you and Germenil should know it."

"I know, I know. It is not only necessary he should be told, but it is right and honest. I would not so deceive him, even to become Clémentine's husband."

"You will be her husband, my boy, in spite of all. So cheer up. Germenil is too just and reasonable to punish you for what is not your fault. He will only see in you the man his daughter loves; and the good, dutiful son of his old friend."

"Ah! yes. Your son; that name is indeed dear to me, and honourable. If only——"

"You must have more confidence in yourself my lad. Where will Germenil find a more eligible son-in-law, or one he would like as well? He knows you are no *gaspilleur* who will squander Clémentine's *dot*. And do I not give you up the *Auberge*—the most flourishing business in all the country round. So summon up your courage, and meet them with a cheerful face. Believe me, my old friend is too anxious for his daughter's happiness to let this matter prevent your marriage."

"Heaven grant it may be so," said Charles.

"As he spoke the sound of approaching wheels was heard, and M. Germenil's carriole drove up to the gate. Charles ran forward to meet it, followed by M. Dumont. He helped his *fiancée* to descend, and stood beside her, while Pierre, François, Louis, and the rest, who had run out on the sound of the wheels, lifted down the numerous parcels which filled the *carriole*, and which, from the interest Clémentine took in their safety, evidently contained her wedding finery. The parcels safely landed, the servants carried them into the house, and the young people rejoined their elders, who had walked towards the house, Germenil saying,—

"You did not expect us so early, I dare say, *mon ami*, but Clémentine was so impatient, I only wonder she did not insist on starting in the middle of the night so as to arrive in good time."

"Well, well, neighbour; we were once young ourselves, and we know how much young folks have to say to one another on these occasions."

"Do you know I think the little mare Cocotte was as impatient as her mistress to get here. She came along at such a pace, one would have thought she knew she was coming to a fête."

By this the parcels had all been unloaded to Clémentine's satisfaction, and she and Charles came forward.

"Well," said Germenil, "now that important business is done, perhaps you would give a kiss to your future father-in-law."

"With all my heart," said Clémentine, throwing her arms round M. Dumont's neck, and giving him a hearty kiss on each cheek.

"And you, Charles," added the farmer. "Are you so bashful that you wait for permission to kiss your bride?"

Charles, who had for a moment forgotten his melancholy, started at these words, and his face became again overcast as he replied,—

"To be Clémentine's husband, M. Germenil, is what my heart most longs for, and if I refrain from greeting her as my bride, it is because honour forbids my doing so till you have heard what my father has to tell you. When you have listened to him you will then be in a position to decide whether you still consider me worthy of such happiness and honour."

"What does the boy mean?" cried Germenil, amazed; while Clémentine, her blue eyes full of dismay, ejaculated, "*Ciel!*"

"I will explain it all," said M. Dumont; "meanwhile you, Charles, can take Clémentine indoors, and show her what we have been doing in her honour."

"That means," said Clémentine, making a little *moue*, "that I am not to hear—"

"Never mind, my dear; later you will know all."

"Well," cried M. Germenil, as soon as they were alone, "what is this mighty secret which weighs so on Charles's mind, and makes him pull so long a face?"

"He has reason to look sad, my friend," replied Dumont. "What I am now about to reveal to you may rob him of all the happiness of his future life."

"Parbleu! you alarm me," exclaimed Germenil. "What is this mystery—explain!"

"Learn, then," said Dumont, in a voice of deep emotion, "what no living creature knows save ourselves, but what I can no longer conceal from you. Learn, my friend, that Charles is not my son!"

"Charles—is—not—your—son!" repeated Germenil, while intense amazement took possession of every feature.

"My son in everything save in the tie of blood; but that alas! is wanting."

"But—but," said Germenil, "I don't quite understand how——"

"I will tell you the story from the beginning; that will be the best and simplest way," said Dumont, interrupting him.

They seated themselves on one of the benches under the limes, and leaning his head on one hand, M. Dumont began his story, to the accompaniment of merry laughter and the sounds of cheerful voices, which floated towards them from the open doors and windows of the *Auberge*.

"You know already," he began, "the circumstances under which I lost my wife—now some twenty years ago—so there is no need to go over all that. Shortly after her death I left the place, taking the child with me, and went to Grenoble, where I had a relative, with whom I intended to stay a short time, and in whose care I thought of leaving the little one until it was a few months old, and better able to bear the fatigue of a journey, as it was but a fragile little creature, owing to its premature birth. But another sorrow was in store for me. Very soon after my arrival at Grenoble the child died, and I found myself alone, without either wife or son. I left Grenoble on my way home.

"Early on the morning of the second day after I had started, I was going along a rather unfrequented road, when I came to a wayside shrine. I paused opposite it for a moment to say a prayer, when I thought I heard a faint cry. Looking down I perceived a small bundle lying at the foot of the shrine. I alighted from my horse and examined it, when, what was my

amazement to find it contained a new-born infant, wrapped in a shawl such as the countrywomen wear in those parts.

"I looked around, but could find no trace of anyone. The little creature seemed to have been abandoned there, and as I looked at it, the thought came into my mind that Heaven had sent it thus to replace the one I had lost, and fill the void in my heart. So I said to myself that I would take the child and bring it up as my own. You may be sure no one put in a claim to it, so I resumed my homeward journey with my little charge, and from that day to this the secret has been buried in my own heart, till I told it to the boy himself last night."

"But did you make no inquiries as to who the mother was?" asked Germenil.

"They told me that the *Maréchaussée* were searching for a woman who had escaped from them while under a grave charge. She was probably the mother of the little waif! Poor creature! she doubtless died of hunger and exposure!"

"Was there no mark of any kind on the child's clothes?"

"It had no clothing. It was simply wrapped in the shawl, on the corner of which was worked the name 'Marie Beaumont.'"

"It was a kind act, my friend," said Germenil.

"And one that God has repaid me for a hundredfold," replied Dumont. "No father ever had a better son born to him than that boy has been to me."

Germenil got up and walked up and down a couple of times in silence, then, approaching Dumont, he said,—

"Is this relative of yours, in whose house your own child died, still living?"

"No, no," was the answer; "dead this dozen years."

"Ah!" said Germenil, drawing a long breath, "I see no reason why the marriage should not take place."

"I knew it! I knew it! I knew your good heart, neighbour, and felt sure of what your answer would be. But it is not everyone who would act as you are doing."

"Well, *mon ami*, we will keep the secret between ourselves, on account of the prejudices of others who don't think as we

do ; but, in my eyes, Charles will always be the worthy son of my old friend ; so come, let us talk about the *contrat.*"

As they turned towards the door, Clémentine ran out, pulling Charles by the hand, who looked anxiously towards his father.

"Well, lad," said Dumont, "another time you will have more confidence in your old father."

Charles turned as pale as death and stammered, "What—what does this mean? Is it possible, M. Germenil, that you still consent?"

"Quite possible, my boy, and quite true," said Germenil, clapping him affectionately on the shoulder. "And now, let me see you give your bride that kiss you have so ungallantly kept her waiting for."

Clémentine submitted with a good grace, remarking, however, that she would like to know what they meant by all these mysteries.

"Don't you trouble your little head about it," replied her father ; "but be satisfied with the knowledge that, in your father's opinion, you will have the best husband in the province."

"That is my opinion too," replied Clémentine ; which speech emboldened Charles to take another kiss.

"Now," said M. Dumont, "I am sure Clémentine is longing to don some of the finery in those boxes of hers, so let us all go in and get ready, for our guests from the village will soon be here, and there is some business to be done first which concerns you two young people."

CHAPTER III.

THE VULTURE AND ITS PREY.

Just as the party had disappeared into the house, a voice was heard on the road outside the gate trolling a merry air,—

"Ouvriers, dépêchons,
Gagnons bien notre argent;
Dépêchons, travaillons,
Gagnons bien notre argent,"

and a couple of strangers turned into the courtyard of *Les Bons Amis*.

It would not have been easy to find a more disreputable, not to say villainous-looking, pair than these new arrivals. It was not merely their wretchedly poor appearance, their ragged, travel-stained garments, but there was that indefinable something about them, by which the practised eye at once distinguishes one of the criminal class from the mere mendicant.

The first to enter was the singer. He lounged in with a sort of devil-may-care swagger, the last words of his song still on his lips; while, at the same time, he cast a rapid glance around: the searching, somewhat anxious glance of a man who needs to be always on his guard, who looks to find danger lurking in every corner—the glance of a man at war with society.

He was a tall man, of thin yet muscular frame, about fifty years of age; his dark hair thickly sprinkled with gray, and in parts almost white; his face was partly hidden by a black bandage, which covered one eye, and added to the already sinister expression of his features, as well as bringing into still greater prominence the cadaverous colour of his skin. His features were aquiline, and no doubt he had been handsome in his youth, before dissipation, and crime, and hardship had done their work; before his mouth had hardened into those cruel

lines, or his eyes had learned that expression of cool, relentless ferocity, which brought despair into the heart of any poor wretch who might chance to come between him and the object he had in view; in fact, he was the very type of a cool, remorseless, daring villain, though at the present moment it suited him to assume the air of a light-hearted vagabond. With all that, there was a certain substratum of refinement about him, the last remnant of earlier associations, an easy insolence of manner, and an air of one accustomed to command, which had its effect on the simple *villageois* amongst whom he found himself, and overawed them, in spite of his broken shoes and torn coat. He was dressed in an old brown coat buttoned up tightly; round his neck was twisted a red cravat; he wore reddish pantaloons and a red striped waistcoat, remains of a pair of riding-boots, and carried on his head a high-crowned white hat much dilapidated. He carried a stick, which he twirled on his finger as he advanced into the courtyard with an air of the greatest *insouciance*, singing another couplet,—

"La tendre Annette,
S'en va seulette,
Sous la coudrette,
Chanter le Robin des Bois."

His companion, who followed closely behind him as he entered the courtyard, was of quite a different type, and even less prepossessing. He was a mean, scoundrelly-looking little man with brown hair, cropped short, and coarse, repulsive features, with whom vice and crime were not in any degree, however small, the result of circumstances, but were the inevitable outcome of his nature and instincts. He was the consummate fruit of hereditary degradation. It was natural that he should walk behind his stronger and more masterful companion, whom he seemed to hold in considerable awe, and it seemed natural, too, that he should carry both their bundles, as he did. He wore a grey coat and an odd-looking pair of old Wellington boots.

The leader, as he seemed to be, having taken a seat at one of the tables under the *tilleuls*, with an air as if the place belonged to him, his companion followed his example with a frightened air.

"Well," said the tall one, "we are not far from the frontier now. It won't take us long to get over the Jura, and then *Messieurs les Gendarmes* may go whistle."

"I wish we were over, Rémond," said the other; "my blood runs cold every time I see a gendarme; and they have a way of looking at one that is not pleasant. I'm sure I don't know what brought you up here. We might have got much more quickly over the frontier."

"We might have got still more quickly back to the Lyons prison if we had tried to cross just where they were on the look-out for us. Bah! Bertrand, you are only a white-livered fellow after all."

"Oh, I don't pretend to have your assurance. You march along as if you had nothing in the world to be afraid of."

"Can't you understand, you fool, that that assurance is our best safeguard? I wish you would cultivate it a little, for, with your cursed cowardice, you'll get us into a hole one of these days. What is there to be afraid of besides? This bandage disguises me completely; and haven't we our passports quite *en règle*."

"Thanks to my little accomplishments."

"Just so. You're good for that much at any rate. But in the devil's name try and not look so frightened whenever any one speaks to you. We would have been stopped at the last *poste* if it had not been for my 'assurance,' as you call it."

"I'll not be easy till we are over the frontier and in a place of safety. The sight of a gendarme, I repeat, makes my blood run cold."

"Courage—courage, and above all, audacity—that's the grand point. We will soon be out of danger, and in the meantime we'll have some food and rest ourselves. *Holà*, here, somebody," he cried, knocking with his stick on the table. Then taking off his hat, he placed it on the table beside him, and having wiped his face with a ragged handkerchief, he crossed his legs comfortably; and, taking a knife from his pocket, proceeded to trim his nails in a leisurely way. His hands were characteristic, like everything else about him. They were white and smooth—the hands of a man who had

never done manual labour, with long lithe fingers that seemed formed for card-sharping, and yet were muscular enough to make one feel there would be little chance for the man whose throat was clutched in their grip of steel.

"These people don't hurry themselves," he observed, presently. "*Holà*, there, are you all asleep?"

Pierre appeared at the housedoor grumbling to himself at being called to attend to strangers at such a time; but when he saw the pair who waited his appearance, his disgust was great, and was not lessened by the air of easy condescension with which Rémond beckoned him to approach, and desired him to bring some refreshments.

"Nothing else?" said Pierre.

"Well, I think I could eat a bit," said Bertrand.

"What! are you hungry?" said his friend.

"Yes, I am, aren't you?" Then turning to Pierre he asked what he had got in the house.

"Whatever M'sieu desires," said Pierre.

"Let us hear the *ménu*," said Rémond.

Pierre went over a list of dishes to each one of which they found some objection, and finally ordered some bread and cheese and *pommes de terre à l'huile*, with a bottle of *vin ordinaire*.

"If you would not mind, gentlemen," said Pierre, "being served out here—we are rather crowded in the house to-day. In fact," he went on with an air of much importance, "we are to have a wedding to-morrow, and to-day is the *dîner du contrat*."

"So as you serve us at once, *mon vieux*, we don't care where we eat," said Rémond, and as Pierre disappeared, he continued, "I thought there *was* a festive air about the place. Well, a little diversion will do us good, and I take quite an interest in weddings."

"You!" remarked Bertram. "Then why don't you get married yourself?"

"Oh, that is an old story. I was married long ago."

"The devil you were! You have kept it very close. And where is your wife?"

"Hang me if I know! Why, let me see, it must be more than twenty years since I lost sight of her."

"And have you never heard of her since?"

"Never."

"Well, now, that's a pity. A woman is sometimes useful."

"Not that one. You see, my friend, she was one of those persons afflicted with a conscience and principles—which I found interfered with my plan of life. So," he went on, while a cynical smile deepened the cruel lines round his mouth, "finding myself one day in rather a tight place, I made the only use I could of her, and left her to occupy it."

Pierre having brought what they had ordered, placed it on the little table before them, and then betook himself to the gate to usher in the company who began to arrive; all the principal people of the village were there, including the good *curé*, who was always ready to take part in the innocent pleasures of his flock.

M. Dumont came out of the house to meet his guests, followed by M. Germenil, Clémentine and Charles, the latter, of course, being the centre of interest.

Some of the elder people preferred to go at once into the house, others remained to watch the young people dance. The violin players having arrived, and been installed by Pierre in a convenient corner—with a good supply of wine beside them—a country dance was soon in full swing.

The strangers having finished their frugal meal, sat watching the dancers. Presently, the country dance being finished, Rémond remarked to his companion,—

"That's an uncommonly pretty girl with the black eyes. I'll ask her to waltz with me."

"What!" said the other. "You will venture?"

"Bah!" replied Rémond. "She is not a gendarme in disguise;" and getting up, he walked nonchalantly across the empty space which divided him from the young girl, and with a flourishing bow, requested the honour of waltzing with her.

The girl hesitated a moment, but his grand air impressed her. She felt sure he was not what he seemed—perhaps

someone of noble birth who had met with misfortune—so she timidly consented. One thing was sure, she had never before had a partner who danced so well. She was quite sorry when the waltz was over, and leading her back to her place, he left her with a most elegant bow.

He rejoined his companion. They lighted their pipes and sauntered off towards the other side of the house.

While the waltz was going on Charles and Clémentine had strolled down to the gate and gone out on the road. They presently reappeared, Charles supporting a poor woman who seemed hardly able to walk. They placed her on a seat, and Clémentine went to procure her some wine and food, for she seemed quite exhausted. She returned, carrying wine and bread, and followed by her father and M. Dumont.

As soon as the woman was somewhat revived by the wine they gave her she thanked them for their kindness; of which she said she stood in sore need, as she had tasted nothing since the previous morning. In answer to a question of M. Dumont's, she said she did not belong to that part of the country, and was on her way to Chalon, where she hoped to find employment as a domestic servant.

"You have then relatives at Chalon, or friends who will assist you?"

"Alas! no, sir. I know no one there. The good God will help me and find me friends as he has done here, and now I will go. I am better now, and need no longer trespass on your kindness."

Charles had been watching her, his heart full of pity for her desolate condition. He was thinking vaguely of the story he had learned the night before of his own unfortunate mother, and how she too, might have been as friendless and wretched as this poor wayfarer.

"No! no!" he exclaimed. "It is impossible. You are in no state to travel on foot. You must stay here to-night, my father, I am sure, will not object."

"Why, my boy," said M. Dumont, "you are master here now, and even were it not so, I never have and never will turn any poor, starving creature from my door. Give her all she

needs for to-night, and to-morrow we will see if she is well enough to continue her journey."

The dancing was now over. Those guests who remained for the dinner went indoors with M. Dumont, and the remainder went home. Presently a servant brought the poor woman some dinner, which she ate at a table not very far from where the two men had been sitting. She did not look like a common beggar—this woman—there was an air about her of one who had seen better days. Her clothes, though poor, were carefully mended, and scrupulously clean. She spoke correctly, in a low soft voice. What could be seen of her hair, under the closely tied *foulard* she wore on her head, was of snowy whiteness, in strange contrast to well-defined dark eyebrows, and large dark eyes, rendered more shadowy still by the hollows which grief and want had carved around them. She could not have been much over middle-age, though, at the first glance, her white hair made her seem older. She had long finished her dinner, of which she had eaten but sparingly, and now sat, her head supported by her hand, buried in thought; sad, indeed, must have been the thoughts which could impart so deep a melancholy as that which overcast her face. As she sat there motionless, the two strangers came back into the courtyard. Rémond, always on his guard, paused as he caught sight of the woman whose arrival he had not noticed during the dance. Making a sign to his companion to remain still, he advanced cautiously behind her, and managed to see her face without being seen. But at the first glance he recoiled with a look of terror, while it needed all his self-control to enable him to suppress an ejaculation.

"What is it?" said Bertrand, who had seen him recoil.

"Nothing!" he replied.

"Then let us go. It is time to be on the road."

"Presently. Let us sit here a little longer;" and as he spoke the thought surged through his brain. "Is it possible! Can it be possible!"

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNFORESEEN DELAY.

MEANWHILE things had been progressing merrily indoors. M. Dumont at the head of the table, with his son, and future daughter-in-law at his right and left hand, and M. Germenil facing him, had pressed his good fare on his guests with hearty country hospitality, and they had done justice to it in a way that delighted the old *cuisinière* Margot, who was as much a part of *Les Bons Amis* as the walls themselves, and who had insisted on carrying one or two of the principal dishes herself, setting them down before her master with a "*voilà!*" full of meaning, which seemed to say "beat that if you can," while her complacent smile showed she was sure of her position as the best cook in all the country round. The good wine circulated freely —healths were drunk and old stories retold, and full of high good humour and content, they adjourned to the red damask *salon* to witness the signing of the *contrat*. Here, however, an unexpected hitch occurred. At the last moment it was discovered that the *notaire*, who had come from the neighbouring town of St. Maurice, some leagues away, and was the guest of his cousin, the *curé* at the *presbytère*, had forgotten an essential paper, without which the necessary formalities could not be completed. There was great dismay at this hitch in the proceedings, and much wrath was poured out on the head of the notary's clerk, to whom the forgetfulness was attributed—a *souffre douleur* is indispensable on such occasions. Charles was in despair—poor little Clémentine almost in tears—for she had overheard the whispers of a couple of old *commères*, who, with many shakes of the head and sighs, decided that such delays were very unlucky; and *they* wouldn't be surprised at

anything that might happen. Perhaps there would be no wedding at all, &c., &c.

However, there was nothing for it but to make the best of it. So it was decided that the notary's clerk should start at once, and taking the *carriole* should make all speed to St. Maurice, procure the missing paper, and return after a short rest, so as to arrive at *Les Bons Amis* by breakfast time. The contract could then be signed at once, and the wedding go on as already arranged.

The only person dissatisfied with this arrangement was the poor clerk, who was not remarkable for courage, and did not particularly relish the long lonely drive in the dark, which lay between him and St. Maurice. Specially, as when the stories were going round after dinner, he had overheard the *maire* of the village, Monsieur Riffaut, tell his neighbour at table, that there was a report that the notorious Robert Macaire had escaped from prison at Lyons. Of course, Lyons was a long way off, but all the same the little clerk did not feel at all comfortable. However, it was settled without his opinion being asked, and Pierre was despatched to see that the *carriole* was harnessed without delay.

After a little more conversation on the all-important subject, the company took their departure promising to come in the morning in good time, and bidding Charles and Clémentine keep up their spirits, for after all there would not be any real delay in the marriage, and the *contrat* could just as well be signed in the morning, and the only ill-foreboding ones being the two old *commères* before mentioned, who, ejaculating, *oh! la pauvrette*, as they bid her goodbye, exchanged at the same time, looks more significant than words.

Leaving Charles and Clémentine together, M. Dumont and M. Germenil went down to the gate of the courtyard with the departing guests.

Having seen them all off, they turned and walked slowly back across the courtyard towards the house.

We left Rémond and his companion seated at one of the tables, not being very anxious to attract attention, as they saw the two men approach, they slipped quietly into the shadow,

behind the raised stand on which the musicians had been seated.

The air was still, and Rémond's sharp ears, accustomed to listening, caught a fragment of their conversation, as they slowly passed, at no great distance from where he was concealed.

"I wish," said Germenil, "that this delay had not occurred. I was anxious to get the business finished to-night."

"Well!" said Dumont, "the delay wont be long; once asleep, the time will pass quickly enough, and as Picard will be back before eight o'clock in the morning, there will be no real delay in the wedding."

"True enough," said the other; "all the same, I shall be very glad when Charles has taken charge of his wife's *dot*. I don't like the responsibility of carrying about twelve thousand francs in notes," he added, putting his hand to his breast pocket, and showing his friend the corner of a well stuffed pocket book.

As Rémond, in the shadow, overheard these words his eyes gleamed with the rapacity of a bird of prey.

"Do you hear?" he muttered, looking significantly at his companion.

"I do!" said the other shortly; returning his look.

"Oh! you are quite safe in *Les Bons Amis*," answered the cheery voice of M. Dumont, clear and distinct on the evening air. "Nothing will happen to you here. You are not thinking of those bugaboo stories our friend the *maire* told us at dinner, of the achievements of that villain Robert Macaire?"

He would have spoken less confidently perhaps, could he have seen the expression which passed across the evil face of his hidden and unknown guest, as he uttered these words,—

"Oh! no, Dumont, I am not afraid of such imaginary dangers; and I think too"—looking complacently at his stalwart proportions—"I would be a match for any robber. But," he added, "I will be glad to be relieved of this responsibility."

"And I," said Rémond to himself, with an ugly smile, "will be happy to do you that service. Perhaps my skill will prove an equivalent for your strength."

M. Dumont had paused a moment, and laid his hand on his friend's shoulder, as he spoke these last words; and as they stood thus Charles came out of the house, and approached them quickly.

"Father," said he, "I think it will be better that I should go myself with Picard."

"You!" said Dumont. "Why should you go?"

"Well," answered the young man. "For one reason, Picard is so frightened at the idea of going through the forest alone, that I am afraid to trust him, lest he should cause a further delay. Besides that, I am so anxious and impatient that I would wish to go with him—if it were only that then, the time will seem to pass more quickly than if I remained here, imagining everything that could possibly happen to delay him. It will be night. I can be of no use here; and I am quite sure we will get back more quickly if I go, than if we send Picard alone."

"Perhaps he is right," said M. Germenil.

"But what does Clémentine say?" observed M. Dumont. "We must consult her wishes in this matter. If she consents to your going, I have nothing to say against it; but of course if she objects——"

"Oh!" cried Charles, interrupting him, "Clémentine is quite of my opinion. She has as little confidence in Picard's speedy return, as I have. Is not that so, dear Clémentine?" he went on, addressing the young girl, who had come out of the house, and joined them just as Charles was speaking.

"It is, Charles," she replied. "You know," she went on, addressing the two old men, "Charles is brave and strong. Not like that cowardly little Picard; and then he will lose no time; because—because"—she added with a little blush—"*I* will be waiting for him at the end of his journey."

This last argument carried the day. M. Dumont gallantly remarking, that with such an object in view, he thought even Picard would forget his fears.

So it was decided that Charles should accompany the little clerk to St. Maurice.

"The *carriole* is ready, M'sieu Charles," said Pierre coming

towards them. "It is waiting at the back gate, as I thought that would save you a bit of a round. If you follow the lane round by the corner of the marsh, it will bring you into the high road to St. Maurice in half the time."

"All right, Pierre, that's a good idea of yours."

"Before you go, M'sieuCharles, will you please to tell me how I am to distribute the rooms to-night."

"Ah!" said Charles, "I was forgetting my duties. Give Mademoiselle Clémentine the room at the end of the corridor, and put Monsieur Germenil in No. 13."

"And the poor woman yonder, where is she to go?" inquired Pierre.

"Let me see. You had better put her in the small room near M. Germenil's."

"Bien M'sieu, No. 8; and in case any travellers should arrive and want rooms, where shall I put them."

"Oh! If any one should come, which is not likely, put them in the rooms on the *entre-sol*. So that our friends may not be in any way disturbed. And now I must be off," he went on. "There is no time to lose. We have a long road before us. Come father, you'll see me off too. Oh! I had almost forgotten. Here Pierre," he said, taking a bunch of keys out of his pocket, you had better keep these in case of need. They are all numbered should you want to open any of the empty rooms."

"Bien M'sieu," said Pierre taking the keys.

Charles then drew Clémentine's arm through his own, and the four proceeded to the back gate, where the *carriole* was waiting, with Picard already in his place, and looking much better pleased than when he thought he should have to go alone. Of course there were some friendly jests at his expense, which he took in very good part; feeling quite in good humour, now he had a companion, and a companion too, who knew so well, how to use, in case of need, the pair of pistols which Pierre had put in the pocket of the *carriole*.

"So you are afraid of Robert Macaire, Picard?" said M. Germenil, looking round first, to make sure that Clémentine was not within earshot. "I thought you had more sense,"

"Ah! M. Dumont, you're laughing at me now, but one never knows what may happen; c'est l'imprévu qui arrive toujours."

"Such a thing as a robbery is unheard of in this part of the world," said M. Dumont; "and if Macaire did escape from prison, I make no doubt the gendarmes have caught him long 'ere this. Come, Charles," he cried to the young man who had lingered a few paces behind with Clémentine, and was deeply engrossed in bidding her good-bye; "it is time to be off, if you are going; and the mare is so impatient to start that she will go without you if you don't hurry."

Thus aroused from their dream, the young people came up.

A hearty good night to his father and Monsieur Germenil, a last kiss to Clémentine, and Charles, jumping lightly into the *carriole*, took whip and reins, and bidding the man let go her head, was off like a shot, and very soon out of sight.

CHAPTER V.

THE PLOT.

The two strangers had remained motionless in their place of concealment until M. Dumont and his three companions had disappeared into the house. They then looked cautiously round to see if there was any one there likely to observe their movements, and finding the courtyard was quite empty, save for the poor woman, whose back was towards them, and whose head was sunk upon her folded arms in an attitude either of exhaustion or of despair—probably of both—they emerged from the shadow—two sinister forms—and seated themselves again beneath the trees.

Bertrand's face was ghastly pale, and his coarse features wore an expression of uncontrollable terror.

"You heard," he muttered, while his teeth chattered, and a shudder convulsed his frame; "you heard what they said."

The other made no answer, but sat silent, thinking, with an expression on his face which would not have reassured M. Germenil regarding the safety of his money could he have seen it.

"*Hein!* Rémond," repeated the other; "is it not time to go? we have a good opportunity now while there is no one about. You heard," he again repeated, in a terrified tone, and lowering his voice still more—"you heard that name!"

"Bah!" said the other, "always a coward. Am I a man, think you, to be frightened at a name! Listen to me, Bertrand, if you are not in too cursed a fright to understand what I say. You heard what the old man said about the twelve thousand francs he had in his pocket-book. Well, that has decided me to remain here to-night."

"What! you are not afraid—you mean to——"

"I am not afraid, and I do not mean to leave here without that money."

"No, no, it is too dangerous," said Bertrand, rising to his feet, "I will not stay; you can do as you like."

"Sit down," said the other, in a tone of concentrated fury, and grasping his companion's wrist with a grasp of steel, which literally forced him back into his place.

"Take care what you're about; you know I'm dangerous when I'm crossed. I am determined to have this money. We will share alike; but you shall stay, and do your part, or— You know what I am capable of, or you ought to, by this time," he added, with a look which made the other's blood run cold; and as he *did* know pretty well the stuff his companion was made of, he decided that on the whole his best plan would be to remain.

Having thus settled their little difference of opinion, Rémond went on to explain his plan. He reminded his confederate of the bunch of keys which Charles had left with Pierre, and which contained a key for each room in the house, each key with its own label attached. They knew from the directions which they had overheard Charles give Pierre, as to the distribution of the rooms, which room M. Germenil would occupy. The first thing to be done was, having engaged a room for themselves, to obtain access to the bunch of keys, and take off the one which opened M. Germenil's door. It would probably require some adroitness in order to get possession of the key; but surely between them they ought to easily outwit a *villageois* like Pierre. The key once in their possession, the rest would be easy enough. As soon as the house was quite quiet, and everyone fast asleep—"and these country folks sleep sound,"—they would, by means of the stolen key, enter Monsieur Germenil's room, possess themselves of the precious booty, and then, hey for the road!

Rémond calculated that, considering early country hours, and the fatiguing busy day they had had, the household would be fast asleep by eleven o'clock, and that at twelve o'clock at latest they ought to be able to carry out their plan, and be off; which would give them a good six hours start before Monsieur Germenil would be likely to discover his loss, to say nothing of the time it would take to communicate with the gendarmes, and the time that would be wasted deciding in which direction the search should be pursued.

"But," said Bertrand, "supposing that M. Germenil were

to awaken, and, seeing strangers in his room, were to call for help; we would be trapped then?"

"Bah!" said the other, "you are *embêtant* with your imaginary difficulties! He won't waken up!"

"How can you answer for that?" said Bertrand.

"He won't awaken I tell you," said Rémond, in a savage tone, and with the some look in his eyes as when his companion had spoken of leaving him. "Enough of this. I'm tired of your cowardly fear. Come now, and let us engage a room, and see how the land lies, and if we can get a chance of securing the key. Summon up your courage now, and put a bold face on it! Above all we must not seem as if there was anything to trouble us, or anything we need fear. If suspicion is once excited, no one knows how it will end. Assurance *mon ami*, and audacity—that's our cue! If they make any difficulty about giving us a room, why we can show our passports as a guarantee of our respectability—our respectability my friend, do you hear? Though I must admit your appearance *is* against us!"

"There's not much to choose between us in that respect!" growled Bertrand, to himself, in a surly undertone.

"However," the other continued, not noticing his companion's comment, "I don't expect there will be any difficulty, as we will only have to deal with that stupid old fool of a waiter. The young man might have been more troublesome, but fortunately he is gone. I hope he won't be too much disappointed when he arrives in the morning, and finds the lady minus the cash! But lovers don't mind these practical details! The world has hardened me," he went on in a tone of mock sentiment, "but I've been in love myself, and know all about it—

"'La tendre Annette
S'en va seulette,
Sous la coudrette,
Chanter le Robin des bois.

Le beau Narcisse,
La croyant novice,
La suit à la piste—
La suit pas à pas?"

During the latter part of their conversation they had gone round to the other side of the house to look for Pierre, whose voice they heard in that direction, giving some orders for the morning.

"Bravo!" he cried, as Rémond came up singing. "Monsieur can sing at any rate. 'Tis a pleasure to hear such a voice as his! I used to sing myself, once on a time, but I'm too old now."

"Let me see," he went on, "M'sieu wants the *note*, I suppose. Two cheeses, ten *sous;* two breads, four *sous;* two *pommes de terre à l'huile*, ten *sous;* one bottle of *vin ordinaire*, six *sous; c'est ça, M'sieu, trente sous.*"

However, Rémonde explained to him that they had not come in search of their bill, but wished to engage a room for the night, which Pierre told them they could have if they did not object to a small room on the *entre-sol*, explaining at the same time that "M'sieu Charles" had given directions to that effect, in order that no risk might be run of disturbing M. Germenil or "M'amselle Clémentine." He little thought, poor man, that the strangers knew all that as well as he did. However, they assured him quite gravely that they would be quite contented with the room he proposed to give them, Rémond adding, with a significant wink at his companion behind the back of the unsuspicious Pierre, that they would take every precaution in order not to disturb the gentleman's slumbers.

Seeing that Pierre was quite ready for a gossip, they profited by the opportunity, and were soon the best of friends.

In the bustle and excitement of Charles's departure for St. Maurice, and the circumstances which led to it, the poor wayfarer in the courtyard had been for the moment forgotten. At first she felt restless and ill at ease, impelled by the instinct of the hunted, suffering creature, to be up and on her way; but by degrees the peacefulness and home-like security of the place soothed her restlessness, and she sank into a deep reverie, which carried her back for many a long year—to the days when she was still young and happy—to that peaceful southern village where her childhood and girlhood had been passed; years full of innocent pleasures and harmless enjoyments; years spent under the roof of loving parents, whose pride and

joy she was. All was happiness till *he* came—the handsome, false-hearted stranger, who had changed the clear, peaceful current of her life into troublous and muddy waters. She saw herself a wife—at first a happy wife—then neglected, ill-used. Her mother dead of a broken heart at seeing her child's misery. Oh horror! her father's gray hairs bedabbled with blood—and shed by whom?—Herself, the victim of a false accusation. Then a fugitive, fleeing to save her child from the degradation of being born in a prison. Then the agony of that mother who abandons her child to strangers, to save it from a possible future of misery and crime. And then the weary years that followed—hunted, suspected—hungry and footsore, friendless and forsaken—living in hourly terror of seeing again the face of him who had been the evil genius of her life.

"Ah! my God!" she cried, in a low tone of horror, startled from her reverie and looking round her, her eyes dilated and her hollow cheeks blanched with unutterable terror.

But there was nothing there to alarm her—nothing—only the benevolent form of M. Germenil just emerging from the house door, while a mellow voice behind the *Auberge* sang—

"La tendre Annette
S'en va seulette," &c., &c.

"Ah!" she murmured, "will the sound of that voice never leave my ears? Is there no peace on earth for me? Even here, she thought, these memories haunt me; and yet, if I could only find such a refuge as this, I might in time learn to forget a little. They all seem so good and kind. If they would only let me remain here I would serve them well. My son, if he were alive, would be about the age of this young man who was so kind to me. But it is impossible. They would ask me questions which I could not answer. Ah, no! she thought, as she wrung her hands despairingly, it will be even better not to remain here to-night. I will thank them for their goodness, and will go. I am strong now and able to walk—yes, it will be better so. "I will go, I must go." She said these last words half aloud, and as she rose and turned towards the house, she started to see that M. Germenil was close beside her,

CHAPTER VI.

THE STOLEN KEY.

Monsieur Dumont, Clémentine, and her father stood at the gate watching the rapidly disappearing *carriole,* and did not stir till the last sound of the horse's hoofs died away on the distant highway to St. Maurice. Then, with one accord, they turned to re-enter the house. Poor Clémentine, as was natural, looking rather downcast, though she was evidently doing her best to keep a cheerful face. Still, she could not help thinking a little of the ill-omened whispers she had overheard, and began to half regret she had consented to let Charles go. Now that he was really gone, it seemed to her she could have better borne the delay if he had been with her. She would, at least, have known that he was safe in the house, and now who could tell what accident might befall him by the way; then she would never forgive herself. At this thought her face grew so melancholy that it attracted M. Dumont's attention.

"Come, come, *ma petite,*" he said, taking her arm affectionately under his own, "cheer up. We can't have your pretty face looking so *triste.* Charles will be back safely before you open your eyes to-morrow morning, and when you see him, you will laugh at your own fears. Come, now, we will go in and amuse ourselves with a game of *trictrac* until bedtime, and try and forget all our little troubles."

So they went in, M. Dumont telling Margot to prepare them some of her special mulled wine by bedtime, which he said was a capital specific for making one sleep soundly.

Then the *trictrac* board was produced, and they began their game.

Monsieur Germenil did not join in the game, but sat down to read a Paris newspaper which the *curé* had lent him,

and which, though ten days old, was considered quite new in that out-of-the-way place—and a great treat too. After awhile he folded up his paper, and, saying he would go and smoke a pipe in the courtyard, betook himself off, leaving M. Dumont and Clémentine deep in their game, for *trictrac* was a favourite game with both of them.

M. Germenil was a kind-hearted man, and was touched by the deep dejection of the poor wayfarer's attitude, and the sad expression of her face.

"Poor creature," he thought to himself, as he paced up and down before the house, watching her the while; "she interests me; she looks as if she had seen better days. She certainly has seen great trouble. Her face tells that, and her whole appearance. I wish we could do something for her. She might be useful to them here, or I would take her home with me, and find her something to do. Of course, it is rather a risk with a stranger one knows nothing about. But I like her looks, and I daresay she will be able to give some account of herself. I will speak to her at any rate, poor soul, and see what she has to say."

At which point of his meditations, having finished his pipe, he knocked the ashes carefully out, and putting it into his pocket, advanced to the woman's side.

As we have seen, she had risen from her seat with the intention of seeking her benefactors, thanking them for their goodness to her, and then resuming her journey. Perceiving M. Germenil beside her as she turned, she made him a deep courtesy.

"Well," he said, kindly; "I am afraid we had forgotten you for the moment, my good woman. But you have had some dinner at any rate?"

"Yes, sir, thank you!" she replied.

"Well," he went on; "sit down again. I want to talk to you a little."

She sat down in silence; trembling in every limb, and feeling sure that the questions she dreaded—to escape which she had been about to fly from the only shelter she could hope for that night—were now about to be asked her.

"I have been thinking," he went on; "that perhaps we might be able to do something useful for you in the way of enabling you to gain a decent livelihood, as you seem anxious to do. We are all interested in you!"

"Monsieur is very good!" she said, in a broken voice.

"But, of course, it will be necessary that you should tell us a little more about yourself; we don't even know your name."

"My name is Marie, Monsieur!"

"Well, Marie, you have not, I imagine, been always as poor as you now appear to be, or as friendless?"

"No, sir," she replied. "My parents were well-to-do people, who cultivated their own land. We wanted for nothing. My youth was a happy one, and my future promised to be so too; but that promise was not realised. Alas! sir, you see before you one of those wretched beings whom misfortune and misery seem ever to pursue!"

"Take courage, Marie," said M. Germenil, compassionately. "Better days are no doubt in store for you, and you will yet find a recompense and consolation for all your troubles."

"Oh, sir! oh, sir!" she cried, stirred out of her usual reserve and self-restraint by his tone and look of compassion, "there could be no recompense, no consolation for such trouble as mine. Father, mother, brother, child, friends, home, bereft of all, a wanderer on the face of the earth! but not guilty! oh, not that! God, who sees into all hearts, knows that I am innocent!"

"Innocent!" repeated M. Germenil. "Have you then been falsely accused of some crime? Speak, Marie, you have said too much to stop there. You must explain those words."

She had risen to her feet in the excitement of speaking, and now sank down again in an attitude of utter despair, saying, in a dull, hopeless tone,—

"I cannot! I cannot!"

"You cannot!" he said, in a tone of surprise. "If you are innocent, why should you fear to speak? You can at least tell me the circumstances under which you were accused, and leave me to judge. You will not find me a harsh judge, Marie."

By this time she had recovered her composure and self-control, and, rising to her feet again, she turned her pale, sad face towards him, and said in a low, resolute tone,—

"I am grateful for your goodness, sir, but I can give no explanation!"

There was a short pause, and then M. Germenil said, in a severe tone,—

"In that case, there is nothing more to be said. But you had better go at once. We are honest people here, and have no place for such as you. However," he added, "I cannot leave you to die of hunger and exposure, whatever may have been your crimes. Take this purse; it contains sufficient to keep you from present want."

She had listened to his words in silence, with downcast eyes; but when he offered her the purse, a red flush passed over her wan cheeks as she replied, with an air of dignity,—

"No, sir; I thank you, but I cannot take your money! God, who knows the truth, will provide for me!"

She turned away, and moved slowly towards the gate; but something in the weary droop of her figure, and her slow, sad walk, touched M. Germenil's heart as he looked after her. His conscience pricked him, and he began to reproach himself with having been too harsh with a poor creature who was entirely at his mercy. And, after all, what harm could it do to anyone to keep the poor thing one night? In the morning he might, perhaps, persuade her to tell him what she now persisted in concealing. So he hurried after her, and insisted on her remaining, saying he had been too harsh and sudden.

She was at first unwilling to remain, but he insisted, and she finally consented, much to his relief. He then forced the purse on her, which she had refused, saying she must take it as a sign of his interest in her fate; adding, that perhaps she would think better of it by morning, and give him some further explanation. "'*La nuit porte conseil*,' you know." But she shook her head at this, with the same expression of sad resolve; and, while thanking him for his great goodness to her, and the proof of confidence he had given her, still persisted in her refusal.

"Well, well," he said, feeling strangely interested in her.

"At least, you will not leave to-morrow until I have spoken with you again?" which she promised him.

So Marie remained at *Les Bons Amis*. Thus Lachesis and Clothos spun these varied threads of life to a common centre, while Atropos, with her shears looked grimly on. *She* knew whose thread would next be severed.

In the meanwhile the strangers had been improving their acquaintance with Pierre, and watching an opportunity of getting access to the bunch of keys on which the successful issue of their villanous project depended. In the midst of all his jests and songs, Rémond never lost sight of his purpose, and his scheming brain never rested for a moment.

Pierre had shown them where they were to sleep, and their practiced eyes had taken in at a glance the relative positions of the rooms, and Rémond ascertaining by a couple of apparently careless questions that they were likely to have a clear field for their operations since those of the servants who slept in the house had their rooms in the *mansarde*, while M. Dumont slept in a room which opened off the large *salon*. They would have no neighbours, said the garrulous Pierre, because M'sieu Charles, who occupied a room next theirs, was as they knew gone to St. Maurice, and would not be back till morning. Upon which Rémond observed with an indescribable leer at his confederate, that he wished the young man had not gone, as he was of a sociable disposition and liked company.

Having deposited their bundles in their room, they followed Pierre downstairs again.

Monsieur Germenil had rejoined Clémentine and M. Dumont, whom he found finishing their last game of *trictrac*. He said nothing about his interview with the poor woman to whom they had given shelter, beyond that he had arranged to see her before she left in the morning, still believing that in the morning she would explain all, and not wishing to prejudice any one against her.

Presently Margot herself brought in the mulled wine which M. Dumont had ordered. When they had partaken of it they went to their respective rooms, after exchanging affectionate good-nights.

Meanwhile, Pierre having seen that the poor woman was safe in her room and the front door locked, took a basket, saying he must get some wine out for the morning and lock the *cave*.

At this Rémond pricked up his ears, and thought to himself that his opportunity was now come to get possession of the much-desired key.

He at once professed himself anxious to be of use to his dear friend, Monsieur Pierre, a *galant homme*, with whom he had the greatest sympathy, and who indeed must be fatigued after such a busy day. What could he and his friend do to assist Monsieur Pierre—his friend who was also at his service.

Oh! there was really nothing to be done, explained Pierre, except to fetch the wine, and that was nothing. Well, they would at least acccompany him; he would surely not refuse them that satisfaction.

Having taken his basket, Pierre was about to start, but Rémond observing no signs of the keys, suggested that his dear Monsieur Pierre had forgotten to take them. Pierre, however, explained that the key of the *cave* was in the door, and that the bunch of keys to which Rémond referred contained the duplicates of those in use in case of any being lost. "But," he continued, "I have forgotten something, and that is the lantern. The *cave* will be so dark at this hour that I will not be able to find the wine without a light, and perhaps one of these Messieurs will be so good as to hold it for me while I get what I want. I will go and fetch it," he added, hurrying indoors.

The word "lost" was a sufficient hint to the sharp-witted Rémond; and, before Pierre returned with the lantern, his fertile brain had devised a scheme, and in a few rapid words he explained to his confederate that he must contrive to delay Pierre for a moment, so that he, Rémond, should get to the *cave* a little in advance of the other two. He had only just time to say this when Pierre reappeared, carrying a lighted lantern. Rémond took it from him gaily, declaring that he would go first and light the way; and, with a significant glance at Bertrand, he walked on with jaunty step humming to

himself a lively air, while Bertrand, who insisted on taking the basket, followed with Pierre.

Just as Rémond turned the corner of the house, close to the door of the *cave*, which, as we have already said was in a line with the house-door, the other two being a few yards behind him and out of sight, he heard an exclamation, a scuffling noise, and profuse apologies from Bertrand, who, in obedience to the hint given him to delay Pierre, had intentionally stumbled, letting the basket fall and sending it rolling back a little by the aid of a sly kick. Then falling against Pierre in his pretended anxiety to find it again, he had overbalanced that individual, who found himself sitting on the ground in a most undignified way.

One stride of his long legs, brought Rémond to the door of the *cave*, one dexterous turn of the wrist, and the key was out of the door, and transferred to his pocket. The whole transaction occupying much less time than it takes to describe it. Then turning quickly back, crying,—

"What is it? What's the matter?" he rejoined his companions.

When he learned what had happened, his indignation was extreme. *Butor*, *cochon*, *imbécile*, *cuistre*, were the best names he had for the unhappy cause of the accident, on whom he lavished so much abuse, that Pierre could with difficulty pacify him, by declaring that it was quite as much his own fault as Bertrand's.

Peace being restored, they continued on their errand, Pierre carrying the basket himself this time. He placed it on a little table beside the door of the *cave*, which he proceeded to open, Rémond politely holding the lantern in order to facilitate proceedings, but great was his amazement, when he saw the lock was empty.

"*Diable!*" he cried. "What has become of the key. It was in the door an hour ago, and not a sign of it now."

"Dear me!" said Rémond, "how very annoying; some one must have taken it."

"Taken it, who would take it!" cried Pierre, anxious for the credit of the place. "We have no thieves here I can tell

you. It must have fallen out," he continued; "we will soon find it, if one of you gentlemen will be good enough to hold the lantern while I search. If we don't find it, I must only go and get the other bunch."

So Rémond held the lantern, thinking to himself that the key would not be found, and sure enough it was not. Though Pierre made most diligent search, not a trace of that key was to be seen.

"*C'est pourtant drôle!*" said Pierre, raising himself up after a last attempt to look under the door of the *cave*. "*Tiens!* perhaps the *patron* took it himself, seeing it in the door, and thinking I had forgotten it. I must ask him about it in the morning;" so saying, he went off to fetch the bunch of duplicate keys.

He returned almost immediately, carrying them in his hand. As he approached, Rémond, who had stooped down, as though to look for something under the table where the lantern stood, raised himself, saying, "Is this the key Monsieur Pierre? I found it lying here, just beside the leg of the table."

"Peste!" said Pierre, putting the bunch he held down on the table beside the lantern. "That's it sure enough, now how did I miss it. I'm sure I searched well enough. Ah! yours are sharp eyes, Monsieur Rémond."

Rémond was on the alert, his keen glance had already spied out the key he wanted, with its label, No. 13, in Charles's clear writing, and his hand concealed in his pocket, grasped the knife ready to sever the cord that attached it to the ring; one moment was all he wanted, and then the twelve thousand francs were his. At the thought his eyes gleamed like a vulture's which scents its prey. He drew a long breath of relief as Pierre taking up his basket which lay on the ground, turned towards the door of the *cave*, with the single key in his hand, leaving the bunch still lying on the table beside the lantern. He opened the door and went in, but when he had got a few paces in he stopped, and called to them to bring the lantern.

But that moment was enough. Quick as a flash, those long supple fingers did their work, and with a smile of triumph, Rémond grasped the wished for key.

Then with inimitable *sangfroid* and audacity he carried the lantern himself into the *cave*, saying he could not again expose Monsieur Pierre to the awkwardness of such a *maladroit* as his esteemed friend.

He helped to fill the basket with many a gay jest; held it, while Pierre locked the door of the *cave*, and when the latter was going away without the bunch of keys, reminded him of his forgetfulness, adding, that though Monsieur Pierre had said there were no thieves at *Les Bons Amis*, still it might be dangerous to leave them there, since he, who knew what good wine was, had seen the contents of the *cave*. At which Pierre laughed heartily, as an excellent joke, as he put the keys in his pocket, and so they sallied back into the house. Rémond singing as they went,—

"Ouvriers, dépêchons,
Gagnons bien notre argent,
Dépêchons, travaillons,
Gagnons bien notre argent."

While the first glimmer of the moon rose over the fields of ripe corn, and the rows of clustering vines, which surrounded *Les Bons Amis*.

Lachesis and Clothos had finished their task, the tangled threads were spun, their ends united. While Atropos grimly raised her shears.

CHAPTER VII.

A DEED OF BLOOD.

It was now nearly midnight, and a deep silence reigned in and about the *auberge* of *Les Bons Amis*. A silence unbroken save by the hoarse croaking of the bullfrogs in the marsh away beyond the cornfields.

It was a world in miniature—a very microcosm—that peaceful village inn, for within its walls this summer night every phase of human life was represented. Faith, hope, and charity dwelt there, with joy and love; while beside them were shame and despair, with greed and theft, and stealthy-footed murder.

The moon was high in the heavens, her wan face pale with the scenes of misery and crime on which she had looked that night, and of which she was to witness yet another.

Within the house every one was asleep save Rémond and his confederate. They had spent some time in oiling and cleaning the key, which had apparently not been used for some time, and now were quite ready for their villainous enterprise. They had decided to wait till half-past eleven, and as the sound of the church clock, chiming the appointed hour, rang out clearly across the stillness of the summer night, they silently arose and left the room. There was no need to speak—even had not every word been a danger. They knew what they intended doing, and words were superfluous. It had been decided that Rémond should unlock the door, as that required a steady hand and cool nerves, the least jar in the lock might lose them all; and so these two ill-omened figures glided along the corridor with noiseless footsteps, looking like two foul birds of prey in the occasional glimpses of moonlight which fell across them from the small casement windows.

As they passed the door, of the room where Marie was, they

paused and listened anxiously. It was important she should be asleep. They were soon reassured by her regular breathing and perfect stillness. The poor forlorn hunted creature had for a time escaped from her troubles in the blessed forgetfulness of sleep.

They had not long to delay at Monsieur Germenil's door. They quickly satisfied themselves that he was asleep, and then went to work at once. Bertrand took from his pocket a very small dark lantern, such as is used by burglars, and turned the light so that it fell directly on the keyhole, while Rémond ascertained by gently inserting a straw into the aperture that the key had been removed from the lock. Poor Monsieur Germenil had in fact got out of bed to do this which he had at first forgotten, with that mistaken idea which so many people have, that it is safer to take the key out, and it now lay beside his black pocket-book, one corner of which peeped from under his pillow. Poor ill-fated, kind-hearted, M. Germenil those dread shears will soon be closed.

Well, the lock being empty, Rémond skilfully and noiselessly inserted the key he carried. A moment's pause, and the strong steady practised hand of the robber turned it. Another moment's pause, and turning the handle he gently pushed open the door, and the coveted booty was at length within their reach.

Rémond now, with the same noiselessness and skill, took the key out of the lock and shut the door again and locked it so that if by chance any one should pass there would be no sign of disturbance. He was an old hand this, and his was no slovenly work.

As had been already arranged Bertrand remained beside the door to listen for any movement, and ready to come to Rémond's help if the need should arise. What *need* was it they contemplated, and how was it to be met ?

The light from the casement fell full on the sleeping man. He had pulled back the chintz curtains so as to leave it entirely unshaded, as he liked to be awakened by the first gleam of morning sunlight; he was not a dweller in the town whose nervous overwrought brain required unbroken darkness to soothe it to rest. He had gone to sleep full of kindly, happy

thoughts, rejoicing over his daughter's happiness and the realisation of his own and his old friend's long-cherished wish as to the marriage of their children, and planning what he would do for the poor wayfarer who had so strongly excited his interest and compassion. As he lay there he looked the very picture of an honest, healthy, happy man—a strange contrast to the villainous countenance of the man who now bent over him.

Rémond had approached the bed at the side furthest from the window; but his keen eyes soon perceived the corner of the pocket-book he was in search of projecting a little from under the pillow, at the side opposite to where he stood. He at once perceived that he had a somewhat difficult job before him. He dared not risk stretching across the sleeping man, who lay with his face towards the window, in order to reach it, for the bed was wide, and in such a strained attitude as he would have to assume, he could not rely on the steadiness of his hand. The only alternative was to go round to the other side of the bed, where it would be within easy reach, in which case there would be the danger of a shadow in consequence of his having to pass between the sleeping man and the uncurtained window, and he knew, by experience, how little sometimes awakened a sleeper. Any attempt at closing the curtains was of course quite out of the question. It would be much too long and risky a process. All this passed rapidly through his mind, and he promptly decided to try the other side of the bed.

It was a large old-fashioned four-post bed, and getting softly down on his hands and knees, he crawled noiselessly round like some noxious reptile. By this device he avoided the danger of throwing his shadow on the sleeper. When he got opposite the place where the pocket-book lay, he cautiously put himself in such a position as to be able to spring at once to his feet if necessary, then raised his head till his eyes were on a level with the surface of the bed. And slowly, gently, cautiously, very cautiously, that hand with its rapacious fingers crept over the coverlet till it touched the prey it sought. First touched, then grasped, then gently gently, drew back again.

But what was that! What unheard sound disturbed the sleeper! Was it perchance the grating of Atropos' shears!

Who can tell? Warned by that almost imperceptible movement, the hand lay still as though cut in marble, while a baleful gleam shot from the evil eyes which watched the sleeper. After a pause, the gentle gliding movement began again. Slowly the pocket-book was drawn from its hiding-place, and success seemed certain. When with a shudder—the shears must have grated more loudly than before—the sleeper opened his eyes. Those eyes which had closed on happy smiles and loving looks, opened to fall on that rapacious hand and evil face.

Great God! how came they there?

He had no time to think, to look, to breathe! At one fell bound the robber springs upon him, and the long hands clutch his throat in a grasp of steel.

The need has come, and he looks towards his companion.

"Come," he motions with his lips, rather than speaks. The old man struggles hard for his dear life, and he is strong, but that avails him not. Bertrand approaches, white with fear, and trembling in every limb, not at the idea of a crime, but at his own danger.

"The knife!" mutters Rémond, hoarsely, with a motion towards his pocket.

Bertram takes it out and opens it—a wicked knife it is with long curved-back blade. He opens it, and offers it to Rémond, who however seems to read something in his hang-dog face, and instead of taking it, mutters savagely, while his grip tightens on the old man's throat,

"No, *Sacré cochon!* you don't play me that trick a second time! You'll take your full share now! Cut, and be quick about it!" Seeing the other hesitate, "Cut, or by all that's damnable, I'll slit your throat from ear to ear, and leave you here to keep him company, if I swing for it!" he said this with a savage ferocity of look and tone that convinced his companion he was in earnest.

One quick movement of the venemous curved knife, one convulsive shudder, and M. Germinel fell back dead—his throat cut from ear to ear—while the red blood oozed slowly out of the gaping wound, and saturated the snowy linen sheets.

* * * * *

Rémond wiped his knife carefully on the sleeve of M. Germenil's coat—the coat he had intended to wear at his daughter's wedding, and which hung over a chair beside the bed, along with his embroidered waistcoat, and flanked by his silver-buckled shoes. He then shut it up and put it in his pocket, took the pocket-book from under the pillow, opened it, took out the notes which he carefully counted and put into his breast pocket, returning the empty pocket-book to its place under the pillow. Then, as though a sudden thought struck him, he said,—

"We may as well divide now." So, taking the parcel of notes out of his pocket again, he divided them into two equal shares, and handed one to Bertrand. His thought being that, in case they should be detected, *he* should not be found with all the money upon him, and Bertrand thus, perhaps, escape at his expense, though he had taken care he should be a sharer in the deed itself. Still, it would be well that he should be found with his share of the money as proof of his complicity. Rémond, being quite determined, if he could avoid it, not to suffer alone, in case the luck should turn against them. He knew very well that *he* would not hesitate to escape at his companion's expense; and knew, too, that Bertrand was not more scrupulous than himself.

Having finished the division of the money, they left the room, locked the door behind them, taking the key away, and returned to their room with the same caution they had used when setting out to accomplish their nefarious project.

As they passed by Marie's door, with noiseless footfall, Rémond listened a moment, and a devilish thought sprang to life in his brain that here, perhaps, was safety—here a victim to bear the burden of their guilt, and its punishment.

As they reached their chamber, the church clock chimed the quarter after midnight.

As soon as they were safely in the room and the door locked, Rémond took off his coat; and, sitting down, proceeded to secure the notes carefully between the lining and the cloth. This he did with quite a cheerful air, as of a man contented with himself. Occasionally he paused a moment in his task,

and smiled to himself, as at his own thoughts—an ugly smile it was—a smile that boded ill to some one.

Bertrand watched him for a while with ill-concealed impatience, and at last said—

"What are you wasting time for? That can be done as well outside. There is no time to lose. The night is already far advanced, and we must be many miles from here by daybreak."

"Not at all!" replied the other. "We are much safer here, under the circumstances; and here I mean to stay till morning!"

"Safer!" repeated the other. "Safer! Why, when they discover what has happened, we, as strangers, will be the first to be suspected. They will send for the gendarmes; and then—ah!" he went on, with a shudder. "It makes my blood run cold!" then turning fiercely on his companion, "You think yourself so clever; you will listen to nobody's advice. Your infernal vanity will bring us to the gallows!"

"*Tiens, tiens!* No hard words, and, as for the——— Well, you know what! There is no need to put it *en évidence*. I have rather an objection to the word. It is well for you, my friend, that I have a head on my shoulders. To fly now would be proof positive of guilt. Even across the frontier we would not be safe with the little complication that has arisen," making a significant gesture in the direction of M. Germenil's room. "Whereas, for certain reasons, we are tolerably safe here!"

"What reasons? What do you mean?"

"Just a small detail which you overlooked, *mon ami*. You see the advantage of a little intelligence—you spoke of suspicion attaching to us as the only strangers here. You forget the woman in number eight."

"Oh!" said the other, taking up his meaning at once. "You are a clever chap, and no mistake!"

So, after some further arrangements as to their proceedings in the morning, these two scoundrels went to bed and slept, untroubled by any thought of the ghastly object on which the grey light of morning now began to fall through the wide, uncurtained window.

BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE TOILS.

THE night was past. The sun had just risen above the horizon, and the long, cool grey shadows of early morning fell across the green dewy grass. A soft breeze rustled through the ears of corn and lightly stirred the leaves of the tall poplars. The birds had begun their matin song, the soft murmur of insect life filled the air, and all the music of Nature was awake rejoicing over the new-born day.

All was quiet within the walls of *Les Bons Amis*. Clémentine, with a smile on her rosy lips, dreamt of Charles, who was then fast hurrying towards her under the leafy arches of the forest.

M. Dumont was still fast asleep, little dreaming what a gruesome deed had been perpetrated beneath his roof—the authors of which slept peacefully too. There was, however, one person awake, guilt and innocence slept, but not despair and misery.

Marie had been long up and dressed, and ready for the road, for her one desire was to get away unperceived—to avoid the interview with M. Germenil. The questions she knew he would again ask her—and which she could not, would not answer. The pain, the humiliation of appearing guilty in his eyes—as she felt she inevitably must.

Of course she knew very well that in going away thus—stealing secretly out of her benefactor's house like a thief in the night—she left herself open to the imputation of guilt;

but at least, she would escape the pain of seeing her sentence in their faces, and hearing it in their voices—the faces which had looked on her so kindly and spoken to her so gently a few hours before! Poor soul! for many a long year she had known but little kindness. Truly, her way of life had lain by thorny paths, and now when a refuge presented itself, the grim spectre of the past bade her sternly to be gone.

She had thought it all over with a sore heart, and had made up her mind that she must go. Her absence would be unnoticed in the bustle of the wedding morning, and when it was discovered, she would be far on her way. M. Germenil's kindness had given her the means of living till she procured some work, and when she was far away she would write and thank her benefactors, and beg of them not to judge her too hardly.

It was little past four o'clock, when, taking her shoes in her hand, she stole softly downstairs to the front door. She reached the door safely, and putting on her shoes, she then proceeded to try and open it.

She had almost accomplished her object when she was startled by feeling a hand laid on her shoulder. She turned round speechless with dismay and terror, and saw Pierre standing beside her.

They were early folk at *Les Bons Amis* it is true, but this morning more so than usual. There was still a good deal to be done so that all should be in order by the time the wedding-party arrived, and Charles, who might arrive at any moment, as he was not likely to loiter unnecessarily by the way, would be sure to be hungry after a drive of some hours in the cool night air. St. Maurice was full five leagues away, and he had probably left there about three o'clock. All this passed vaguely through Pierre's head as he lay half asleep, half awake. But the chiming of the quarter after four aroused him thoroughly to the exigencies of the position, and getting out of bed, he hustled on his clothes "anyhow," as he said to himself, and hurried down just in time to stop poor Marie's intended flight.

"Well," he said, looking at her with a suspicious ex-

pression, "I'd like to know what is the meaning of this *manége*. I thought you had promised M. Germenil not to leave till he had spoken with you again?"

Poor Marie quite abashed at his look and manner, stammered a confused reply,—

"I—I—was not going away," she said. "I was —only— going to get a little fresh air."

Pierre grunted incredulously,—

"Fresh air, indeed! People don't steal out of honest folks houses at this hour of the morning before anyone's up for nothing. The *Patron* will get finely taken in one of these days, giving shelter to a pack of lazy beggars who won't work for their living as long as they can contrive to get it for nothing."

These rough words were the last straw to poor Marie's overwrought feelings, and she burst into tears. Taking her handkerchief out of her pocket in order to wipe her eyes she pulled out with it the purse which M. Germenil had given her the previous evening. It fell on the floor with an unmistakeable chink, and Pierre stooped and picked it up, looking from it to her and from her to it more suspiciously than ever.

"*Tiens!*" he said; "a purse full of gold! It seems you are not quite so poor then as you would have us believe. I'd like to know how you came by this!"

"It is mine, indeed," sobbed the poor creature, "and honestly come by. M. Germenil gave it to me last night."

"M. Germenil gave it to you?" said Pierre, amazed and incredulous. "Well, you can easily prove your honesty and the truth of what you say by waiting till he comes down."

Silently Marie followed him into the *salle* and seated herself beside a table near the window, gazing wistfully out, thinking how ready people generally were to credit those in misery with being capable of all sorts of crimes. Pierre, meanwhile, went about his morning duties, grumbling to himself, and casting anything but friendly looks in her direction as he bustled in and out of the room.

The latter part of the conversation between Marie and Pierre, had been overheard by Rémond, who hearing the sound of

voices below, had come out of his room to listen, lest anything might take place without his knowledge, which would cause a hitch in his plans.

He seemed, however, very well pleased with what he heard, and re-entered the room, with quite a cheerful air, Bertrand being still in bed. The sound of Marie's voice, which he had not before heard, confirmed his suspicion of the previous evening, when the momentary glance he had had of her face, had so remarkably affected him, and so disturbed his usual imperturbable self-possession.

Nothing could have fitted in better with his plan. Marie had already roused suspicion by her attempt to get secretly away, and by her possession of the gold, though apparently so poor. A damning circumstance, of which, none knew so well as he, she would be unable to give any satisfactory explanation. The only thing remaining to be done, was to ensure her departure, before a discovery was made of the murder. That accomplished, they were safe. There could be no doubt as to the result, every circumstance pointed to her guilt. She would be followed, arrested, brought back, and they would take their opportunity of quietly slipping away without exciting suspicion. "It's not very difficult to outwit these wooden-headed country gendarmes!" he added, as he finished his explanation.

"You were right enough too, *mon ami*, when you said a woman was always useful. This one was very useful to me some eighteen or nineteen years ago. It is odd *pardie*," he said, reflectively, "that she should turn up again to be of use in the present emergency."

"What do you mean?" said Bertrand. "This one! do you know her then?"

"Yes!" replied the other; "at least, I ought to. I felt pretty sure of it last night, but since I have heard her voice I am certain. She is my wife!"

When Bertrand had finished his exclamations of surprise, his companion went on to explain that he would ensure Marie's flight by letting her know that he recognized her, and as she was apparently anxious to conceal her real identity, he had no doubt of the success of this manœuvre.

"But suppose she recognizes you?"

"Bah! always afraid of something. There is no fear of her recognizing me. This," touching the black bandage he wore, "and the absence of my moustache, which I wore when she knew me first, make my face quite unrecognizable; I change my voice a little, and the thing is done."

In accordance with this arrangement, they now dressed themselves, and went down stairs. Bertrand looking ill at ease, and wishing himself well out of the place. His companion with his usual careless swagger, humming a tune as he descended.

"Ah! *vous voilà*," said Pierre, as they entered the *salle;* "you're early risers *messieurs;* I hope you slept well."

They assured him they had not slept so well for years, and complimented him on the excellence of the beds, adding that they would not have left them so soon, but that they wanted to get a good piece on their way before the day got too hot. Rémond observing, as he glanced towards where Marie sat, that early as they were, they were not the first.

"Euh, euh!" growled Pierre, scowling at poor Marie; "some folks have their own reason for wanting to be the first up. I don't hold with such doings," he added, as he left the room.

The two men seated themselves at a table at the further end of the room from where Marie was sitting, and presently Rémond, making a sign to Bertrand to remain where he was, got up, and sauntered carelessly towards her, pulling the black bandage a little more over his face.

"You appear to be in trouble, Madame?" said he, addressing her in a sort of husky undertone. "Perhaps I could be of use to you."

She remained silent.

"Don't hesitate to speak," he went on; "glad to help an old acquaintance, and it seems to me I recognize your face."

At this she said in a startled tone.

"You know me!"

"I am sure," he went on. "I have seen you at Grenoble. Were you not then acquainted with a certain Robert Macaire."

Marie sat speechless with horror, while he continued,—

"He was a good for nothing fellow too, though he was the husband of Madame."

"For God's sake," she cried in low tones of horror, "do not again utter the name of that monster." Then muttering to herself, as if she had forgotten there was any one beside her, "I must go, I must escape from here at once, let them think what they will of me." She looked wildly round, as if seeking a means of escape.

Rémond looked at her with a cynical smile, and then hearing Pierre outside the door, he coolly sauntered back to his seat. "That was neatly done. Really a bad character is useful to one sometimes in escaping from a difficulty. Now if I had been one of your virtuous young men she would not have been so anxious to get away."

Pierre came in with many excuses for having kept them waiting. But he said he had been detained by the arrival of the *sous-officier* of gendarmes from the next *poste* with three of his men, who were now seeing their horses being put up, and who would be in presently to their breakfast.

"He is capital company is the *Brigadier*," added Pierre, in all innocence of heart. "I'm sure you'll get on capitally together. It's a pity you are not mounted, too, or you might make a stretch of the road together. They're out on duty, and must hurry on as soon as they have had something to eat and rested the horses."

Pierre's interlocutors did not, however, as may be conceived, share his views as to the good fellowship of gendarmes. Their reminiscences of stretches of road traversed in company with such gentry were unpleasantly associated with handcuffs and a stout rope, at one end of which they pursued their unwelcome journey, while the other was attached to the saddle-bow of an individual whom they did not find at all "capital company." Nor were they at all reassured when Pierre went on to inform them that Roger, the brigadier, and his men were out after a couple of forçats who had escaped from the prison of Lyons, and who, according to the latest intelligence, were supposed to be lurking in the forest of La Marche. "Desperate ruffians, too," finished Pierre. "The brigadier has orders to bring

them in alive or dead." So saying, he turned away to attend to something else, when Bertrand, frightened out of all self-control, started to his feet as if to run.

"*Infâme*," muttered his companion, "would you ruin us? Sit down, I tell you." And he had only just time to force him back into his seat when the door opened and the brigadier clattered into the room, armed to the teeth, his professional eye taking in the room and its occupants at a glance.

Marie, who, sunk in thought, had heard nothing of Pierre's conversation, was roused by the sudden entrance of the armed man, and gave him a startled look which he did not fail to perceive. But his eye passed on to rest more searchingly on the two men, whose appearance did not at all please him. It seems to me I have seen them before, he said to himself, as he looked at them more inquiringly than they found at all agreeable, for they at once recognized him as the gendarme who had inspected them and their passports so suspiciously the previous day. The brigadier very soon recalled where he had seen them, and decided that he would keep his eye on them.

"Now, Pierre," he said, "hurry with breakfast, and don't forget some ham. I know of old how good your ham is. And tell my men to hurry with the horses and come in to breakfast; we have not much time to lose."

Pierre hurried off to execute his orders, while the brigadier, still keeping an eye on the two men, took out his pipe and began to prepare it for his after breakfast smoke. Marie, who had been watching for an opportunity to leave the room unobserved, now got up and slipped quietly out, much to the relief of Rémond, who felt that her absence vastly improved the chances of himself and his companion. So much so, that having finished his breakfast he began to hum a tune, crossing his legs as he lay back in a chair filling his pipe, and looking at the brigadier with an air of easy assurance which took Bertrand's breath away, and nearly made him choke with sheer terror as he swallowed his last mouthful.

Just then Pierre returned bringing the ham, and followed by the other gendarmes—four of them. They all sat down to

table and proceeded to discuss their breakfast with excellent appetite. The brigadier, asking Pierre in a low tone, where those men had come from, indicating the pair in the corner by a slight movement of his elbow. Pierre informed him that they were strangers who had slept that night at *Les Bons Amis*, and that he knew nothing further about them except that the tall one was a most amusing chap, and a beautiful singer.

"I wish you could hear him," he added. A wish which was at once gratified as Rémond got up from his seat and sauntered up to the table beside them in search of a match to light his pipe, singing—

"Quel plaiser d'être en voyage!
Jamais l'œil n'est en repos,
Toujours sur votre passage
S'offrent des objets nouveaux."

"Voilà!" said Pierre, pausing and listening, while the brigadier, who did not seem particularly charmed, uttered a dry "hm," and his men went on eating their breakfast in stolid silence.

Rémond, nothing abashed at this want of appreciation of himself and his performance, finished his stave, lighted his pipe, remarked to his companion with a careless air that they must soon be thinking of starting, and that they had better go and put their things together while Monsieur Pierre was making out their little bill, which they would settle when they came down. So saying, and begging Pierre to be sure and not forget what they had had the evening before, he saluted the company with much grace and left the room, preceded by his companion, who could hardly walk from sheer terror.

CHAPTER II.

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

PIERRE was about to enlarge still further on the agreeable qualities of his new acquaintance, when the door of the salle opened, and Monsieur Dumont came in, accompanied by Clémentine.

"Ah, good morning, brigadier!" he said, shaking hands with Roger, who was an old acquaintance. "You are early on the road to-day. Is there anything stirring or special?"

"Nothing, much M. Dumont," replied the gendarme. "A couple of escaped prisoners from Lyons whom we are on the look out for; and here they are somewhere in or about the forest of La Marche, and we are on our way there now."

"Hush!" said M. Dumont, with a significant glance towards Clémentine, who had gone over to the window which commanded a view of the road, and was eagerly watching for any sign of Charles.

"But you rather alarm me, for my son had to pass through the forest on his way to and from St. Maurice last night, and we are now wondering a little at the delay in his return, as we expected him earlier.

"But what was M. Charles doing at St. Maurice?"

"He went to fetch a paper which had been forgotten by the notary."

"Notary!" said the other, surprised.

"Oh, yes," said M. Dumont, smiling; "I forgot that of course you don't know that my son is to be married to-day to the young lady whom you see at the window."

"A fortunate man is Monsieur Charles," said the gallant brigadier.

"But," said Dumont, anxiously, "what you tell me——"

Here he was interrupted by Pierre, who had left the room, and now ran in crying out that Monsieur Charles was coming; that he had seen the *carriole* from the top window.

As he spoke the sound of rapid wheels was heard outside, and Monsieur Dumont and Clémentine hastened out to the door to meet him. He was out of the *carriole* and across the court-yard in two strides, and joyful indeed was the meeting between the lovers, while M. Dumont, relieved from the momentary fear which the gendarme's words had aroused in him, clasped his son's hand and welcomed him with a full heart. Before the greetings were finished, the notary and the *curé*, arm-in-arm, turned in at the gate, and the whole party went into the salon together, where Picard awaited them with the papers all in order, and nothing missing this time. The brigadier joined them there on the invitation of Monsieur Dumont.

"Well," he said, laughingly, clapping Charles on the shoulder, "you are a pretty bridegroom to keep a lady waiting."

Clémentine shot rather an indignant glance at him—as much as to say how dared he insinuate that Charles could do anything that wasn't quite perfect. While Charles himself pleaded the bad state of the roads for his being a little late, adding, as he looked round, that there was no time lost by that, since M. Germenil had not yet come downstairs.

"My friend Germenil is not as young as he was, any more than myself," said M. Dumont. "And yesterday was a fatiguing day for him. He had a long drive here to begin with."

After a few minutes' more conversation, Charles went upstairs to see what was detaining M. Germenil; and presently his voice was heard calling Pierre to bring the bunch of duplicate keys, as he had knocked and got no answer, and he feared M. Germenil must be ill. Pierre ran upstairs with the keys, followed by Clémentine.

"Quick, Pierre, quick, give me the key," cried Charles.

But the key was not there. What was to be done.

"We must break the door," said Charles; and accordingly he and Pierre threw themselves against it with all their force. It creaked, gave way, and the three rushed into the room.

Then a dreadful shriek rang through the house, as Clémentine fell senseless beside the bed where lay the body of her murdered father.

Monsieur Dumont, followed by the rest of the party, rushed upstairs to see what was the matter, and stood speechless with horror at the terrible spectacle. Roger, the moment he saw what had happened, gave the order to his men: "See that no one leaves the house." Then he returned to the room to examine further. Charles had, in the meantime, carried Clémentine to her own room, where he left her in charge of Margot, who did all she could for her, with many compassionate exclamations of "Pauvre mam'selle! pauvre p'tite!

Monsieur Dumont assured the *brigadier* that the murdered man had not a single enemy in the world.

"Had he any money in his possession?" asked the officer.

"He had twelve thousand francs. Clémentine's *dot*, which was to have been handed over to my son to-day as soon as the *contrat* was signed.

"Here," said Charles, "here is his pocket-book. Catching sight of the edge of it under the pillow and pulling it out. "But empty," he cried. "There has then been robbery as well as murder!"

"Have you any suspicions?" asked the *brigadier*.

Both Charles and Monsieur Dumont declared they had not.

"But I have," said Pierre.

"You!" they all exclaimed. "Who then do you suspect?"

"The woman who slept here last night."

"If you mean a poor looking woman who was in the *salle*, she left the house a short time ago. I saw her pass out of the court-yard," said one of the men.

"But why should you suspect her?" said Monsieur Dumont.

"In any case we must try and find her and hear what account she gives of herself," said Roger.

Desiring two of his men to go after her in different directions, "She is not long gone, and you will soon overtake her."

He then proceeded te question Pierre, who gave an account of what had happened in the morning. Marie's attempted escape, and the purse of gold he had detected in her possession,

Things began to look very black against the unfortunate woman.

As the *brigadier* said it would be necessary to make a written statement of what had occurred, and of Pierre's evidence, they all now returned to the *salle*, where writing materials were placed before him.

Having heard all that Pierre had to say, he then asked what had become of the two men who had been in the *salle* when he arrived; as he said it would be necessary that they should be examined, as well as every one who had slept in the house that night.

Pierre replied that he believed they were in their room, where they had gone after asking for their bill; and that he would go and fetch them. But just as he was about to leave the room for this purpose, the door opened and the two strangers met him face to face on the threshold.

They had anxiously watched the progress of events. Had heard from their room Clémentine's cry of horror which announced the discovery of her father's murder. The order given that no one should leave the house. Rémond at this smiled cynically at the success of his manœuvre to get Marie out of the house. The bustle and talk of the inquiry. Then seeing from the window the two gendarmes start off quickly in opposite directions, he guessed pretty correctly that the suspicion had turned on Marie. Finally, the party having gone down again to the *salle*, he decided that now was their time to make a move to get off in a natural, unsuspicious way. He knew very well they would have to give an account of themselves to the gendarmes before they could hope to get away, and so decided that the best way would be to go down quietly, as if they suspected nothing which had happened, and ask Pierre if their bill was ready, as they wished to leave. He had some trouble in making his companion understand and agree to this, as he was more dead than alive with sheer terror. However, by bullying and persuasion he got the better of him, and they went down, and as we have seen, met Pierre as he was in the very act of leaving the room to look for them.

"Ah! friend Pierre," said Rémond, as he swaggered into

the room with his usual effrontery, "is our little bill ready which we asked you for? It is getting late and we must be off?"

The brigadier here interposed, and said they could not go at present, as he required some conversation with them first.

"*Hein!*" said Rémond, with an air as though he could not conceive what the man meant.

The brigadier went on. "There has been a murder committed in this house during the past night!"

"A murder!" interrupted the other, in a tone of the greatest surprise. "Is it possible! Pray who has been murdered? It is very unpleasant to think that one has spent the night in a house where such things happen."

"Monsieur Germenil has been murdered, and I must say that your manner is most indecent in speaking of such a terrible occurrence," said Monsieur Dumont, severely. He was most unfavourably impressed by the appearance of the new comers, whom he had not noticed the evening before, and observed to Charles, who stood beside him, that he could not imagine why Pierre had given a room to such suspicious looking characters as these men, in which Charles quite agreed.

The brigadier then demanded to see the passports of the two men. These were produced and closely examined, but seemed to be quite *en règle*, and in answer to the questions as to where they had come from and where they were going, Rémond replied that they had come from Besançon, and were on their way to Lyons, at which name his companion nearly collapsed with terror.

"I presume, M. le Brigadier," said Rémond, with an air of much politeness, "that as you have nothing further to ask us, and as our papers are all *en règle*, we may now resume our journey."

"No," replied the officer, shortly. "You cannot leave here at present. Till the inquiry is finished no one can be allowed to leave the house. We now await the arrival of the woman who slept here last night, and of whom my men have gone in search."

As he finished speaking a noise was heard outside, and presently Marie was brought in by one of the gendarmes.

She had been overtaken before she had gone any great distance. Indeed, not having any reason to think she would be followed, she had sat down a moment by the wayside to rest, and there the gendarme had found her. He had refused to tell her why she was thus brought back, or of what she was accused. The name of her terrible husband, so recently spoken by the sinister looking stranger, had filled her with terror, and she feared he was in some way again about to cause her injury, or unhappiness, or most likely, both. The poor creature trembled in every limb, and the mental agony she was suffering showed itself in every feature.

Her attenuated form, her wan face, and hollow eyes with the wistful anxious look in them of a dumb animal who dreads, and yet expects a blow, excited Charles's compassion, notwithstanding the terrible accusation which was hanging over her. He saw she was hardly able to stand, and advancing, he gave her a chair, saying, in a gentle voice,

"You had better sit down, my poor woman."

With a look of unutterable gratitude she sank into the chair. The little kindly act was balm to her poor tortured heart.

CHAPTER III.

CHECKMATED.

Her heart sank as she looked round her. All eyes were fixed on her. The baleful glances of the two evil-looking strangers; the grave severe look of M. Dumont; and the hard, penetrating judicial gaze of the gendarme. She felt she was in some terrible danger.

"In the name of Heaven," she cried, in trembling tones, "of what am I accused? What does all this mean?"

"It means," replied the brigadier, "that a terrible crime has been committed."

She half rose to her feet, grasping the table beside her for support, as she gazed at him with speechless horror.

"Yes, wretched woman!" said M. Dumont, "the unfortunate Monsieur Germenil has been foully murdered this night. Speak, then, and prove to us, if you can, that you are not guilty of this wicked deed."

She lifted her hands to her head with a gesture as though she could not quite grasp the meaning of what he said, repeating his words in low, horror-stricken tones.

"Monsieur Germenil has been murdered!" Then after a pause she seemed to realize the position she was in. "My God!" she cried, in piercing tones, "do I hear aright. You accuse me of murdering him, my benefactor? Before that God whose wrath falls thus heavily upon me, I swear to you I am innocent."

Her looks and tones were so full of truth and genuine feeling, that the listeners hesitated, and their conviction of her guilt began to waver. Perceiving this in their faces, Rémond insidiously interposed, to the effect that he was sure it was all right, and that Madame would have no difficulty in showing where the money came from which Pierre had seen in her possession

that morning, and that point settled, there would be no longer any reason for suspecting her.

Marie eagerly explained that the money had been given to her by M. Germenil the previous evening.

"The unfortunate gentleman probably knew Madame previously, and took an interest in her, which would account for his giving her a purse of gold," said Rémond.

"Is that so?" demanded the brigadier.

But Marie was obliged to admit that she had never seen M. Germenil till her arrival at *Les Bons Amis* the previous afternoon.

She felt the web closing round her, and struggled helplessly to escape.

"It is a likely story," said the brigadier, "that any one would give so much money to an utter stranger, as you admit yourself to have been to M. Germenil. Let me see," he added, examining the purse which had been taken from Marie's pocket, "one—two—three—four—five pieces of gold, and a purse to carry them in addition; a likely story, indeed!"

"Still," said Rémond, with well-assumed sympathy, "we must not forget that Madame has not contradicted herself, and that she accounted for the possession of this money in precisely the same way when Pierre found her this morning——"

"Yes," said Pierre, interrupting him; "when I found her trying to escape from the house before anyone was up. That did not look very like an honest woman."

"Why," said Monsieur Dumont, "did you thus seek to fly from a house where you had been so kindly treated?"

"Yes," said Pierre; "and after promising poor M. Germenil, who had been so kind to you, that you would not go away till he had seen you again."

Marie remained silent. She could not answer these questions without disclosing all which she had sought to conceal by flight. She looked around her despairingly, and seeing an expression of pity on Charles's face, she appealed to him not to condemn her without some further proof.

"I know," she said, "that appearances are against me, but indeed, indeed I am innocent."

Charles had listened in silence to what had passed; but though appearances were so much against her, he did not feel at all convinced of her guilt, and now said so boldly, reminding those present that as yet there was nothing proved, and that mere suspicion, however strong, could not condemn.

"Be sure," he said, addressing Marie, "that justice will be done. There must be a thorough investigation of this affair; my father and I will see to that."

Rémond began to think that matters were not going quite as he wished them, and observed that himself and his friend were also interested in the matter being satisfactorily cleared up, and that there was one point which ces messieurs had overlooked, and which might help to elucidate the mystery. Perhaps his good friend Monsieur Pierre would tell them if any of the rooms adjoining the one in which the murdered man had slept had been occupied that night. The number of the lamented gentleman's room was, he understood, No. 13.

"An unlucky number," he added, "was No. 13."

"Yes," said Pierre, "*she*"—pointing to Marie—"she slept in No. 8."

"Then," continued Rémond, "as such a deed could not possibly have been committed without some little noise—Madame doubtless heard something—some little disturbance—of which she will tell us, and which will perhaps give some clue to the real culprit."

Thus, with devilish ingenuity, did this monster complete the chain of evidence against his victim.

She, of course, could not meet this new suggestion with any sort of satisfactory answer. She could only affirm again and again that she had been so overcome with fatigue, she had slept heavily, not awaking till the sun was up, and that she had heard nothing, absolutely nothing.

The *brigadier* listened incredulously—her story seemed to him quite unworthy of belief—and he said that there was no use wasting further time. It was his duty to arrest her; and having taken down her statement in writing, he and his men would convey her to the *gendarmerie*, where she would be detained till further inquiries were made.

At this, a gleam of triumph passed over Rémond's face,

He was safe, at any rate. That was all he cared for. He felt no pity for the creature he was so remorselessly sacrificing. No memory of the love she had borne him. No thought that she was the mother of his child caused him to falter for a moment in his fell purpose. He would have regarded such considerations, had they been suggested to him, as mere puling sentimentalities. The *man* was long dead in him. The predatory animal alone remained.

But wait—but wait. Retribution follows crime so surely as the day the night—

> "Though the mills of God grind slowly,
> Yet they grind exceeding small.
> And though with patience He stands waiting,
> Yet with exactness grinds He all."

He had long waited, but the wheels rolled swiftly now.

The *brigadier* had arranged his papers in order before him, and now sat with pen in hand ready to note down the answers of Marie, who sat trembling before him with downcast eyes.

"Your name?" he asked.

"Marie Beaumont," she replied, in almost inaudible tones.

Roger was about to continue his interrogatory when an unexpected interruption occurred. On the mention of this name, M. Dumont and Charles exchanged startled looks, and the former eagerly asked, "Marie *Beaumont* did you say your name was?"

"Marie *Beaumont*."

The answer in the affirmative was given with such hesitation that it led to further questions, and after a while she admitted that she had had a child—a son—which she had been obliged to abandon immediately after its birth.

"You were then under the suspicion of theft," said M. Dumont, "and was on your way to Grenoble in charge of the gendarmes, when you escaped, and——"

"Who are you!" she cried, wildly—for in the white-haired, clean-shaven old man she did not recognize the sorrowing, unshaven stranger who had taken her child—"who knows all this, and speaks to me of my child? If you know aught of him, tell me if he still lives."

"He does," answered M. Dumont, restraining Charles, who was on the point of speaking, while Marie thanked Heaven fervently for having spared her child, even though she might never see him. She had, she said, deprived herself of the consolation of keeping him with her, and abandoned him to strangers, and she would not now darken his young life with the shadow of guilt which hung over her own.

"Though I was innocent then, as I am now," she said, "of the crime of which I have been accused. But alas!" she added, in pathetic tones; "unable to prove it now, as then. I am condemned to wear out my weary life, friendless and alone!"

Deeply moved, M. Dumont turned away to hide his emotion; while Charles, who could no longer restrain himself, sprang forward and, to the utter amazement of those present, clasped her in his arms, crying—"No, no; not any longer friendless and alone. Mother, you have a son!"

"My son! My son! Ah, God be praised, and you too! to find my son in you; who, when I was nothing to you but a miserable, guilty stranger, were kind and pitiful to me. But," she added, turning to M. Dumont, "is this true? Is this really true?"

M. Dumont explained that it was quite true; that he was the stranger she had seen take the child from before the shrine where she had laid it.

This explanation was listened to with many exclamations of wonder from those around, on whom this extraordinary revelation had come like a thunderclap.

"Truly," said the *curé*, until then silent, "inscrutable are the ways of Providence. Be of good heart, my friends, all will soon be made straight. The innocent will be cleared and the guilty brought to justice."

There were two persons among those present who did not by any means desire the fulfilment of this prediction. In fact, Rémond had for some little time been feeling anxious as to the success of his plans. He had not calculated on their being so long detained—and he knew very well that every minute added to the risk of their detection. He knew the gendarmes were looking for him and his companion, and that if their identity with the fugitives from the prison at Lyons were once estab-

lished, that the burden of suspicion would inevitably be transferred from Marie to them. Once arrested, it would be impossible for them to clear themselves. They carried damning proofs of their guilt upon them in the shape of the stolen notes —which would be certainly found—as their clothes were sure to be searched by the gendarmes.

He felt anything but well disposed towards Charles, whom he now regarded as a fresh stumbling-block in his way, and on whom he cast a very ugly look as he instinctively put his hand on his knife. Yes, if it suited him, he would show as little consideration for the son as for the mother.

All this passed rapidly through his brain, while the attention of those present was all directed to Charles and his mother. He explained to his companion, that they had better seize the opportunity of endeavouring to get away.

Bertrand nodded assent. He was too frightened to speak. He seemed to feel the cord round his neck, while the notes, which were concealed in the back of his coat, seemed to rustle every time he moved. Casting frightened glances round him he followed his companion, who with his usual swagger and an air of great assurance, approached M. Dumont, and said with characteristic impudence, that before leaving his hospitable house, he was anxious to assure him of the high esteem in which he held him. That he had done an act worthy of the highest praise, and which made him, Rémond, sensible of his own shortcomings, &c., &c.

During this tirade one of the gendarmes had brought a paper to the *brigadier* which seemed from his expression as he read it, to contain information of importance.

Rémond, whose back was turned to the officer, had made M. Dumont a sweeping salutation, uttered a patronising "Bon jour, friend Pierre!" and now had his hand on the handle of the door, closely followed by Bertrand, when the order rang out in clear decisive tones,—

"Secure those men!"

The gendarmes all crowded into the room, and in less time than it takes to tell, Rémond and his companion found themselves face to face with the *brigadier*, a couple of sturdy fellows on either side.

"What does this mean?" said Rémond, in a blustering, bully tone. "By what right do you thus interfere with and detain two inoffensive travellers? We demand to be released at once. This delay is most inconvenient to us."

"You'll know what it means very quickly," said the *brigadier*, "and you had better drop that tone, my man, it won't do."

Every one present was astounded at the new turn affairs had taken, and formed an eager circle round the *brigadier* and the strangers. Surely so many terrible and wonderful things had not happened under the roof of *Les Bons Amis* since it was first built.

The *brigadier* then proceeded to read aloud the paper which he had just received, and which had thus *boulversé* the situation.

Bertrand's knees doubled under him, and he would have fallen had it not been for the grip the gendarme kept of his collar, while Rémond listened with his usual air of impudent assurance.

"*Brigadier* Roger," went on the officer, "will arrest wherever he may find them, the two prisoners recently escaped from the Lyons prison, who are travelling under the names of Bertrand——"

"That is my friend there," said Rémond impudently, with a nod towards Bertrand, his arms being held by the gendarmes.

"And Rémond," continued the officer.

"Myself!" again interrupted Rémond.

"The first being in reality Jaques Strop, and the second the notorious Robert Macaire——"

"Trapped, *pardie!*" muttered Macaire, as the officer pronounced his name.

"The latter being disguised by a black bandage which covers one half his face——"

Exclamations of dismay and horror were heard from all, as these notorious names were pronounced.

Marie, leaning forward, gazed with dilated eyes on Macaire's face, and as the *brigadier* pulled off the black bandage, she uttered a piercing shriek, and fell senseless on the floor.

CHAPTER IV.

RETRIBUTION.

MACAIRE and his companion being thus identified and captured, would at once have been conveyed back to Lyons, were it not for the question of the murder, which still remained to be cleared up. Their previous bad character, as Macaire expected, caused suspicion to turn on them, and it was decided that they should be detained at *Les Bons Amis* till the following day, in order to allow of the matter being further investigated. They were according placed in a small loft over the stable, and a guard of armed men placed at the door.

Clémentine had been with difficulty restored to consciousness after the terrible shock she had received at the sight of her father's body, and knew nothing, as yet, of the scene which had taken place in the *salle*, or the strange discovery of Charles's parentage. He was now sitting with her, endeavouring to soothe her grief, while she little suspected that his own was so much more bitter; she had lost a father it is true, and by a terrible death, but he had died respected, and beloved by all. While he—he had found a mother it is true, but under what circumstances? He did not for a moment believe her guilty of the terrible charge brought against her. But unless it could be positively disproved, how could he ask Clémentine to become his wife, while such a stigma was on his mother's name? Too many people had heard what had passed, to allow of its remaining a secret.

The poor young man's thoughts were very sad indeed, as he sat holding his fiancée's hand.

Charles had begged so hard of Roger not to treat his mother with the same rigour as had been shown to Macaire and Strop, but to allow her to remain in the house; that the *brigadier* who, under his official crust was soft-hearted enough, had con-

sented to this arrangement, though, as he said, he was exceeding his duty, and might get into trouble by it.

"Do not fear, sir!" said Marie. "I have no wish to go now that I have found my son. Besides," she added, "I am innocent of this crime, and God who knows it, will prove it."

Her first anxiety when she recovered consciousness, was whether, in her surprise she had disclosed the fact that Macaire was her husband, and Charles's father, and it was a great relief to her to perceive that he had not the least suspicion of such a thing, nor had Monsieur Dumont, who had no idea that she had a claim to any other name than that of Beaumont. He had heard the missing woman whom he supposed to be the mother of the little waif, spoken of by that name, as among the country folks, married women were as often called by their maiden names as by their husband's, and he concluded that the "worthless fellow," the "*coquin*" he had heard mentioned, bore the name of Beaumont.

Macaire had had no time to speak, and no one would have listened to him had he attempted to do so. And poor Marie hoped that she might be able to spare her son such a terrible blow as this knowledge would be. She determined, however, to tell all to Monsieur Dumont, who, she considered had a right to know, and who, she felt sure, would help her to keep this great disgrace from falling on the boy he loved, and had so long treated as his son.

Seated in the room where only a few hours before the joyous party had assembled to sign the wedding contract, she told him all. All that we know already of her early history, up to the time when he found the child where she had placed it, at the foot of the shrine. She told him, too, her sad after history, full of misery and suffering.

She had watched him take the child, and had listened till the last echo of his horse's hoofs had died away. Then she had set out again, and with much toil and suffering had dragged herself back to the house which she had left. She had accomplished her object. The child was saved from the stigma of being born in a prison, the offspring of a felon, and her great desire now, was that her friendly guardian should not suffer on her account. It would be ruin to him if it were found that his

laxness had led to her escape. So, at all costs, she must return, once there, she cared not how soon she died; death, indeed, would be a welcome deliverance from her misery. But death does not always come to those who long for it.

Her absence had been discovered, and men had been sent in different directions to look for her, though indeed the sergeant himself was half sorry to see her return. His wife did all she could for the poor creature, who was in a pitiable condition, worn out with anguish both of soul and body. Of course her hostess discovered what had happened, but Marie refused to give any account of what had befallen the infant to which she had given birth, except that it was in a place of safety. The worthy couple decided to keep their own counsel on the subject; an inquiry into the matter would only have brought on her the suspicion of having made away with her infant, and things were bad enough for her as it was—and they were sorry for her, poor soul!

It was some days before she was in a state to be moved. She was then taken to Grenoble to be tried for stealing her father's money.

There a fresh horror awaited her.

Her husband, on making his escape, had directed his steps back to Charmont-sur-pont, in pursuance of a plan he had matured while following the waggon.

He knew that the old man had a large sum of money in the house besides that which Marie had been accused of stealing. Of this he determined to get possession.

He had no fear about returning to the farm; in fact, he thought he would be safer there than anywhere else, as it would be the last place where they would think of seeking him, and, as the money was all in gold there would be no danger of its leading to his detection.

Under cover of the darkness he made his way safely back to the farm, and had lurked round until all was quiet. His knowledge of the house had enabled him to effect an entrance without any difficulty.

He had found the old man busy counting his money, and putting it into bags ready for some hiding-place. Had come behind, stunned him, or, as it turned out, killed him, with a

blow on the head from a heavy iron-bound *sabot*, and then made off with his booty. The outrage was not discovered till the morning, and then its perpetrator was not to be found.

There were traces found, however, which proved his guilt beyond a doubt ; amongst others, the garments he had taken from Marie in order to disguise himself, and which he had left in one of the outhouses.

These facts did not tend to improve the position of the unhappy girl, who was believed to be in collusion with, and screening her husband, with whose previous history she was accused of being acquainted. The upshot of the business being that she was sentenced to ten years' penal servitude. This dreadful punishment the innocent woman had endured, and since its termination had been a wanderer on the face of the earth—homeless and wretched, flying from place to place to avoid the danger of meeting her villainous husband. He had pursued his evil career for a long time with impunity, but some time previously he had been captured and proved guilty of the crime of which he was accused ; he had been confined in the prison at Lyons, and there she believed him to be, until his evil face had appeared before her that morning.

Such was the story which Marie told M. Dumont, telling him also what had passed between herself and M. Germenil when he gave her the money, and how it was to avoid telling the sad story which she had just related, that she had wished to leave that morning before he could see her to renew his questions.

M. Dumont was deeply moved by the story she told him, and assured her of his belief in her innocence, saying that he felt convinced now that Macaire and his confederate had murdered M. Germenil, and that they must leave no stone unturned to prove her innocence. He agreed that there was no need that Charles should know who his father was. And he went on,—

"I am sure that in keeping this knowledge from him, and letting his marriage with Clémentine go on, I will be best carrying out the wishes of my poor friend. Before it takes place, however, your innocence must be proved. It would not matter so much did no one but ourselves know, but it is now

indispensable that you should be cleared. Clémentine knows nothing as yet, and we will keep the knowledge from her as long as possible, in the hope that she may hear the charge and its refutation at the same time. I fear, however, we will be unable to conceal what has transpired, and your relationship to Charles, more than a few hours."

As he finished speaking Charles came into the room, looking very sad; but he quickly cheered up when M. Dumont assured him he was quite satisfied of his mother's innocence, and repeated to him what he had just said about his marriage to Clémentine.

"As to me," he went on, "you will always be my son, my boy. You will only be so much the better off because you will have a mother too."

But the proofs of Marie's innocence and of the guilt of the real culprits were soon to be made apparent.

Pierre's conscience had been reproaching him for his over zeal ever since Marie's arrest, and the discovery that she was really the mother of Monsieur Charles. He felt that it was principally his fault that suspicion had attached to her, and he felt he would like, if possible, to help to clear her of the charge.

He was angry with himself for having been so easily imposed on by the two strangers, who turned out to be such villains, and whom he now began to suspect of being the real murderers.

Why! yes, he remembered now that they had had access for a few minutes to the bunch of duplicate keys—quite long enough, and he, fool that he was, had never suspected anything; 'twas surely they who had taken the key of M. Germenil's room off the bunch! *Tiens!* If he could only find it. Well, he would search. So off he went to the room which the strangers had occupied, and there instituted a thorough search.

There was not a corner of the room he did not thoroughly ransack. Every fold of the window curtains, of the bed curtains, the mattresses, the pillows. He turned up every rug and ran his hand round the seat of every chair; he even examined behind every picture, opened and turned out every

drawer and press, but all in vain; and, disheartened and disappointed, he stood looking vaguely round him at the disorder he had created, and, scratching his head, wondered what he would do next; when his eye lighted on the fireplace. There had been no fire, and yet the coal looked as though it had been disturbed. He did not quite take it in at first, and then, as the thing formulated itself in his mind, he ran to the grate, eagerly removed one piece of coal after another, and presently, with an exclamation of joy, sprang to his feet with the missing key in his hand.

He ran downstairs and burst into the room where M. Dumont, Charles, and Marie were, and hardly able to speak with excitement, cried,—

"Monsieur Charles! *not' bourgeois!* Madame Marie! It is not you. I mean—I am sure, *enfin* I have discovered the assassins. Here it is," flourishing the key.

With some difficulty they managed to get a coherent explanation from him, having heard which, M. Dumont sent Charles at once in search of Roger. They returned together immediately, and the brigadier having heard Pierre's story as to where he had found the key, declared he would at once have Macaire and Strop searched to see if they had any of the stolen money upon them.

After a short absence he returned, carrying the stolen notes. Charles on seeing this proof of his mother's innocence, was too much overcome to speak, and turned to clasp her in his arms, but she had fainted. The shock of this sudden relief from the terrible accusation which had been hanging over her, had been too much for her overwrought nerves. She soon revived, however; and then came the thought of the wretched man who would have to suffer the penalty of his crime, whose life had been such a tissue of evil deeds and had so blighted her own. She shuddered as she thought that even now a chance word might reveal all to Charles.

The *brigadier* said that he should now take steps to remove the two prisoners to the Gendarmerie, and to that end he should at once send one of his men for a cart and an additional escort, as he did not care to risk anything with such desperate ruffians as these were known to be. It was now

getting towards evening, and it would be quite dark by the time they had got all done.

Macaire had submitted in sullen silence to be searched by the gendarmes, and had not answered so much as by a word when they had told him it would be useless any longer to deny his guilt, giving a glance of utter contempt at his miserable companion who writhed on the floor at their feet, groaning, and imploring mercy in the most abject terms. But there was a movement in the long sinewy fingers, and a gleam in the evil eye, that would have boded ill for them had they been fewer in number, or had they not already taken the precaution of removing the knife, whose long curved-back blade could do such deadly work.

He knew very well that all was up for him. He could no longer expect to escape the end which had been so long awaiting him; but nevertheless the desire for liberty was strong within him, and he pondered the possibility of escape. He had heard the gendarme ride off, and guessed pretty well on what errand he was gone. He knew about how long he would be gone—once back all chance of escape was gone—it must be now or never. He sat with his eyes fixed on the little square window which lighted the loft, when his attention was caught by a rope swinging in front of it. He went up to the window and found it was a rope belonging to a pulley which was fastened above the window, and was probably used for raising stores into the loft. He swiftly conceived the idea of swinging himself on to the roof by means of this rope, and so perhaps escape—who could tell? He roused his companion and told him what he meditated doing. Strop was full of fears. If they were seen they would be shot, or if they fell they might be killed.

"All that may happen," admitted his companion, "but what will happen if we remain here is that we will die on the guillotine. I for one prefer some other way; so I'll try this chance. You, perhaps, prefer to sit here like a rat in a trap."

The thought of the guillotine gave Strop courage, and he decided to follow Macaire. They listened breathlessly at the

window till presently the tread of the man who was on guard below ceased. Macaire looked cautiously out of the window, and seeing he had half disappeared into the embrasure of the door, made a sign to Strop, and mounting on the window sill he caught hold of the rope, swung himself loose, and then with one desperate effort swung himself upwards, catching the edge of the parapet, and so pulling himself on the roof. He was cautiously crawling up the face of the roof in order to get to the other side, which was sheltered from the view of the yard, when he was startled by an agonised yell. Strop had followed him out of the window, catching the rope and endeavouring to swing himself upwards as Macaire had done, when, just as he was in midair, the rope gave way and he fell at the feet of the sentry—stone dead. His neck was broken.

Macaire had just reached the ridge of the roof, when the gendarme who, quickly realising what had happened, bounded to the centre of the courtyard, and, looking up, caught sight of the half kneeling figure of Macaire in full relief against the sky. He knew what his orders were, and, levelling his gun, he fired.

The figure on the roof threw up its arms, tottered, fell, and, rolling over and over down the sloping roof, and bounding over the low parapet, fell with a thud, and Robert Macaire lay dead beside the wretched partner of his crimes.

. . . . . .

It was long before the horror of that day somewhat faded from the hearts of the household at *Les Bons Amis*. But all things have their seasons, and one day there was a quiet wedding in the little church.

There was an old man's grave in the pretty churchyard, on which a white-haired woman with dark wistful eyes never failed to lay fresh flowers, and by and by she no longer came alone, but led by the hand two little toddling children, who called her *grandmère*.

THE END

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Stirling, August 1891.

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